

THE
HEART
OF
LADY
ANNE



AGNES AND
EGERTON CASTLE

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THE
HEART OF
LADY ANNE



· AND THE PEACOCKS "— Page 9



THE
HEART OF
LADY ANNE

By
AGNES and EGERTON
CASTLE

Authors of *Rose of the World*
The Bath Comedy *The*
Pride of Jennico
etc


With illustrations in color
by

ETHEL FRANKLIN BETTS

F, 58, 154, 258
and

Numerous Decorations
by

FREDERICK GARRISON HALL



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To

THE HONOURABLE M^{RS} EVERARD PEPYS

♥ *Foreword* ♥



AFTER the fashion of Autolycus (a rogue), calling his ballad-sheets, may not the writers, honest folk though they be, make known, to all who would pause and read, the matter set forth within these pages?—'T is a picture of married lovers, framed in the style of Mr. Chippendale, as befits the days when Lady Anne, in the sweet of her year, smiled and wept upon a younger world.

Would you have more?
—'T is a drama in which the

first gentlemen, as they stride, are conscious of the elegance of a good leg in silk stocking and of a fine figure in a brocade coat; in



FOREWORD



which, if blood be shed, it is between two courtly bows and with a flutter of Mechlin;— a drama in which, if hearts be broken, the pretty heads of *leading ladies* are not shaken with too violent an emotion (lest powder fly incommodingly) and not more than a discreet tear is indulged in; for there is always your rouge and your patch to be thought of. And, la! who would look a fright, even at the call of sensibility?

Or yet again, you may call this a “Tale in Porcelain” of the *Taming of the Shrew*.— *Shrew* (you might say) is, sure, too harsh a name for so dainty a piece as my young Lady Anne. *Taming*, also, is perhaps an overweighty word to depict the conflict of hearts and wit (full of wrath at times but never devoid of courtesy) between the chivalrous, if iron-willed, young English squire, home-keeping by taste and country-loving above all things, and his girl-wife, bred amid the artificialities of a Versailles court and still all afire for the excitement of the Town. But such is the theme: “she would not be taught with a kiss.” And, if taming there



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be, if the lady here learn in the end to recognise herself as

“ a foul contending rebel
And graceless traitor to her loving lord ” ;

if, indeed, she be ready to proclaim, of herself and of all other fair young wives, too self-reliant in a strange, naughty world, that, in such contentions,

“ our lances are but straws,
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare ” ;

at least her experience is more gracious than that of ill-used, bullied *Katharina* ; and its lessons are tempered for her by the watches and loving wiles of a decorous *Petruchio* — in a tie-cue and lace ruffles and with a delicate sense of generosity.

In the eyes of some — in the eyes, at least, of those who happen to have followed with any interest the career of “ *Incomparable Bellairs* ” through the “ *Bath Comedy* ” and other stories — the Lady Anne of the present tale may derive some special lustre from her friendship with Kitty, or rather with my



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Lady Kilcrouney (as she must now be styled : Mr. Denis O'Hara having been accepted at last, and having come to his title). For, as must be surmised by those who have known her in her gay widowhood, whenever she steps upon the scene, Kitty, though married, still merrily guides the plot and leads the cantrip.



CHAPTER
I

♥ *The Heart of Lady Anne* ♥

CHAPTER I



HE blue roan stamped her foot, champed and tossed her head. She was a lady that could not bear to be kept waiting—in which respect she was not unlike Lady Anne Day, her mistress. The morning gallop judiciously administered by Squire Day, the devoted husband, for the greater safety of his fair bride, had but exhilarated the mare's spirit. Her soberer companion—the Squire's own favourite brown—turned his head in rebuke and inquiry towards his volatile companion. Things seemed strangely altered of late at Queen's Compton!

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The ring of the iron shoe on the gravel rose musically up to her Ladyship's room.

"'T is a lovely morning, Nan!" said the Squire.

Lady Anne shifted herself petulantly on her pillow and turned her long blue eyes, somewhat coldly, upon her husband. The Squire moved away from the window, which he had just flung open. A flood of sunshine gilded his strong, erect figure, his fresh wholesome face; a blast of April air, sweet yet biting, breathing as of the flowers to come, yet also of the snows that were but lately past, came frolicking into the bedroom and set the laces of Lady Anne's pretty nightcap dancing round her little pointed face.

"You have sworn to kill me, I declare!" cried she.

"My dearest dear! —"

"To let these horrid rude airs in upon me — before I have found even strength to swallow my chocolate!"

"Why, Nan —"

"My chest was never strong, Philip." An affected little cough escaped from the

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prettiest, healthiest, rosiest lips in all the world; and my Lady Anne Day placed the tip of a taper finger on one side of the roundest young bosom, the while endeavouring to impart an air of anguished fragility to her flower face.

“Yes, this place of yours will be the death of me!”

“Nan!”

The young husband's tones expressed at each interruption the gradations of his wounded feelings. The last was a cry of reproach; and indeed, as a couple of hasty steps brought him close to the bed, there was a distinct, if transient, flash of anger in the frank brown eyes.

Lady Anne gave a scream and flung out a small, forbidding hand.

“In mercy, Philip, keep your distance, and you straight from the stables!”

Squire Day halted, open-mouthed. This new flight of fancy carried her beyond his comprehension.

“Well, have you not been to the stables?” cried she sharply.

“Ay, Nan, that have I, and galloped the

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blue roan thrice round the park to get the trickiness out of her, against your mounting her presently. Was it not settled between us last night," he went on a little wistfully, "that we should ride out together this morning? 'Tis a lovely day," he repeated. "And, indeed, I thought to find you dressed, little lazy-bones."

A sudden wave of crimson flew to the lady's delicate pink cheek. She tossed her head, and the yellow curls, half blanched with lingering powder, danced under the nodding laces about her forehead.

"I apprehend the reproach, Sir. 'Tis a vast pity you sought to wed with a person of my town breeding and indifferent health."

"Your health, love," remarked he, drily enough now, "has enabled you many a time to dance a night through and wear a rosy cheek at dawn — as these eyes have seen. Your health, my sweet lady," he went on, after a contemplative pause, and more quietly, again approaching the bed, "is not (and I thank God for it) such as to cause me anxiety."

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He would have finished with a kiss, but she turned her face sharply away.

“’T is vastly easy to kiss me, Sir, but I could dispense with such caresses from one who thinks naught of breaking a woman’s heart at his leisure.”

The Squire started.

“Do I indeed break your heart, Nan?” His lips trembled as he spoke; whereby it might be seen how young a man this husband was still.

“To refuse a lady’s request — my first request. For no reason!”

The tears of self-pity began to well up in her eyes.

“Now, in God’s name,” said the Squire, “let us get to the bottom of this! I, refuse you? And your first request, forsooth? Do I not spend my days in serving your whims? Hast not the new Lyons brocade for the parlour?”

“Brocade!”

“The new-fangled rose-garden on the old terrace — and the China rose-trees?”

“A few poor flowers —”

“The new coach on springs with the pearl-

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grey trappings and the four greys — such a match as it would beat England to produce again. Equipage for a queen, better than her Grace of Devonshire?”

“Oh, Sir, I fain would ask who gets the most pleasure from the cattle —”

“Why, then, little ingrate, what of the pearls of perfect form for your own white throat? They ran me a naught dearer than the greys themselves. Not to speak, indeed, of the new lackeys and the new liveries — nothing less than *Bleu-de-Roy* and gold would serve your Ladyship, when my dear mother and I had gone to our graves content between old Giles in decent black and honest Joe in snuff.”

“Oh, Sir,” said Lady Anne, her nose in the air, “since you were so content with your lady-mother, ’twas a prodigious pity you should seek to wed. But now, pray, have you naught else to cast up to me?”

“Why, I believe there is a trifle of the new French furniture by Mr. Chippendale; and the spinet, same as his Royal Highness gave Mrs. Robinson; and the chocolate

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service from Sèvres, and the black page, and the peacocks, and —”

“Enough, Sir, enough! You have an accurate memory for your own generosity, *mon Dieu* — a perfect *commissaire-priseur*! Good heavens!” cried Lady Anne, clasping her hands, “peacocks, brocades, trinkets, livery breeches, are these the goods to fill a woman’s heart withal?” She turned up her eyes and looked vastly pretty.

Squire Day edged along the bed until he had reached her side, and then put his arm about her.

“And do you make naught of my love, Nan?” he whispered.

She suddenly nestled her head into the hollow of his shoulder. Strange! the alleged stable aroma seemed no longer to incommoder her.

“If you would but give me the proof,” she whispered back sweetly.

“What proof?” he asked, his lips upon her cheek.

She moved till her own lips were nearly on his, then breathed: “Ah, Philip, I languish here.” He lifted his head quickly — “So far

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from my revered family," she went on piously. The grasp of his arm slackened. "Surely, a house in London for the season —"

He got up abruptly, and stood looking down at her with folded arms; and his eyes — a moment ago so ardent — had grown hard.

"Your chocolate will be cold," said he, after a moment's pause. "Had you not better drink it?"

He took the little tray and laid it on the bed. His attitude puzzled her. The spoilt child-wife knew the man but little as yet, or rather she had not taken the trouble to learn him. She thought that the fact of his not again refusing was so much gained; and, emboldened, she proceeded airily:

"I would fancy a house — in St. James's Square. And since it is not your pleasure that I should have my Town residence permanently — which, indeed, were only becoming to my position — but let that pass — I would ask no more than one hired for the season. Indeed, Philip" — she stretched out her hand to a silken bag on the table beside her bed — "Kitty Kilcrouney tells me

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there's a prodigious bargain agoing on the Mall side — 't is the very thing for me, she writes. A plague upon this bag, that I cannot reach it!"

"Never mind the bag," said the Squire tonelessly, laying one hand on the chocolate tray just in time to avert a catastrophe. "I'll take my Lady Kilcronney's word for it."

"Will you, Philip? Will you, my dearest dear!"

"Nay, love — nay, love," mocked he, "drink your chocolate."

He poured her out a cup. She took it absently and fell to stirring it, her face upturned eagerly towards him, her blue eyes shining with glad expectancy.

"I will send a post to Kitty this very moment," she cried.

"Do so," quoth he; "and tell her that you wedded a country squire, and that your duties keep you by his side."

"Philip!"

"You may add," he continued with a sarcastic smile, in the same measured voice, "that your husband has neither inclination

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to leave his father's estate nor money to squander on Town folly."

"Sir!"

"That he considers it unbecoming for a lady who is wedded, mistress of an establishment, to hanker after the empty frivolities of fashion; that —"

"It will serve, Sir," cried the wedded lady, setting her teeth; "I understand."

Awhile they contemplated each other; she breathing very hard and fast, her eyes flashing ruby fire as only blue eyes can; he with the set expression, the cold gaze that contrasted so strangely with his youthful countenance.

"I presume," she said at length, in a strangled voice, "that you will not dare to interfere with my passing a few days in my paternal home?"

He looked down at his coat-sleeve and flicked a spot of mud from it with one finger.

"Without any remarkable courage," he then said, "I venture to think that your husband's home should suffice you."

Her little body was shaken with fury —

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she drew a hissing breath and choked upon the impotence of words. Then she flung the cup of chocolate at him — prudently wide of the aim, however — and fell back on her pillows sobbing.

He gave one glance at the delicate fragments of the Sèvres cup, at the brown mess on the new Aubusson carpet, then, whistling softly, walked out of the room.

The blue roan's impatient hoof rang up again from the terrace walk. Squire Day, as he closed the door behind him, hearkened to it and felt that the last drop had been added to the bitterness of his morning cup. He had planned such a perfect hour with his sweet Nan — and sweet indeed she could be in her mood — under the limes of the avenue : that noted avenue of Queen's Compton, two miles long, wondrous now in its pale spring green, alive with the flutter and the music of mating birds. And then — then across the turf to the Oak Wood, there to show her that sheet of primroses that already carpeted the Dell; and, again, round by the Beech Plantation (he was sure Nan

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had no idea that the young beech-leaves smelt like roses). Oh, the pride, the joy and the glory of the ancestral estate! Then there were some lambs in the upper field on the border of the Down. Had Nan ever seen a lamb — a lamb without blue ribbons, a country lamb? Poor French Nan, starved of all the sweet sights and fresh beauties of an English country existence! Poor Town-bred Nan, cooped in cities most of the years of her fair young life when she was not parading the alleys of some fashionable French Spa.

Mixed with the insurgent passion, which her looks, her grace, her dainty haughtiness had inspired, the Squire of Queen's Compton had had a kinder and rarer feeling in wooing his pretty love.

Towards the conclusion of that Grand Tour, which the traditional requirements of a gentleman's education had forced upon him — much against his taste — he had met, at a ball given by the English Embassy in Paris, *La mignonne anglaise*, as Lady Anne Vertcœur, despite her French education,

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was universally known. Her fresh English beauty had straightway attracted him: it was as if an exquisite hedge-rose from some home lane had bloomed for him in the midst of the stiff, artificial *parterres*.

He learned that she had indeed English blood in her veins and bore an English name, for all its Norman origin — being the daughter of the Earl of Ongar, former Ambassador to the Court of Versailles.

The fact that she had a French mother; that, from early childhood, she had been practically adopted and brought up by the celebrated Marquise de Jonsac, weighed not at all in the balance against his sudden infatuation. Rather did it increase his determination to win her. Indeed, when she spoke to him in his own tongue, every un-English intonation, every dainty lispéd French syllable, added fuel to his fires. It was monstrous that she should be robbed of her glorious birthright; that the child of an English father should stumble over the accents of her own language. How tender, how delicious a task it would be to teach that innocent tongue! He would

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transplant her, fair English rose, from that unwholesome soil, wherein neither body nor soul could truly blossom, back into the pure surroundings of her fatherland — of his own beautiful, wide estate.

Fate helped the determined lover, as fate will. Too many *petits soupers fins*, too many cups of sweet chocolate, too much devotion to late hours and the excitements of *trictrac* and *ombre*, combined to whisk the Marquise, with uncourtier-like celerity, out of existence. She, who had been accustomed all her days to *les grandes entrées et les grandes sorties*, was not even left the time to make her *révérence* to the world she had loved so well. And bewildered Nan, who had been looked upon as a great heiress, found herself, with the same want of ceremony, suddenly stranded: a little English intruder in a throng of greedy, jealous relations. These latter felt none the more kindly to her that she should profit no more than they of the hypothetical great fortune of Jonsac. *La douillette Marquise* had invested all in a noble annuity — one of those terrible inventions of

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M. Necker — which she had spent as nobly, but the secret of which she had kept with much comfort to herself till her last hour.

Philip Day made good his golden opportunity. When my Lord Ongar landed in France — a fussy, bilious, dissatisfied Whig nobleman, more bilious, dissatisfied and fussy than ever at this annoying turn of Fortune's wheel: he had a large family of daughters and had up to now believed one of them at least generously provided for — behold, the wheel had again turned! Wealth and a happy settlement in life were awaiting Nan's acceptance. Nor was she, in spite of her naturally wayward humour, loth to accept them. Day of Queen's Compton (her father promptly explained to her) was a match for the daughter of any Duke in England. More than a match — for all his plain territorial distinction — for any frog-eating Marquis or Prince of France!

Father and lover between them gave the girl scarcely time to breathe. The marriage ceremony was performed with the briefest possible delay at the old hotel of the British Embassy in the Rue St. Honoré; and Squire

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Day whirled his Nan, with her pretty French ways and her English heart, along the paved highroad, poplar-lined, all haste towards the once English Calais.

But the process of education was to prove neither as sweet nor as facile as he had confidently reckoned. He was yet to find out that, from his English point of view, her mind had been as cramped by the artificialities of foreign life as the rest. He was to find how much he had yet to teach her. But he was strong in love—so he knew. And she was beginning to learn—so he fondly believed.

As he had ridden round his park that morning, his heart had swelled with tender pride. Deeply rooted in his nature was the love of his home; indeed, it seemed an integral part of himself. Here he had been born; here bred; here he would live and die. He was part of the soil; his soul like that of the oak. He was part of its story: Day of Queen's Compton, as Queen's Compton was of Oxfordshire, and Oxfordshire of England—components of a proud whole! He could conceive no fairer fate than his

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own, and thus no higher honour to divide with another. He had never left the noble old house, for school or college or travels, without a heavy heart. He could never be induced now to prolong his visits to the Town beyond a fortnight. That fateful Grand Tour had been the one long separation. Rarely indeed did he seek relaxation without the boundaries of his own walls, although a couple of hours' ride would have brought him to Oxford, yonder sober storehouse of learning and memory, yonder merry haunt withal of youth and promise. He had found his mother, a prudent lady of mighty household proficiency, sufficient company till that day — blessed or cursed — when he had lost his heart straight away to Lady Anne Vertcœur, the spoilt beauty of Versailles.

That the new mistress of Compton and of all its wealth should not promptly begin to follow in the footsteps of the old; that the Squire's lady should not share the Squire's love and pride in his home, even as she shared its wealth and honour, was a state of affairs that had never entered into the

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young husband's calculations. He would not entertain the thought. When the pretty, pettish creature at first scouted the notion of still-room and linen-cupboards, when she vowed that to visit the dairy made her sneeze, that to enter the kitchen made her squeamish, he was indulgent. On the other hand, every whim that beset her for the embellishment in modern taste of the antique rooms was gratified with almost pathetic haste. Did it not show (as he averred to the scandalised Madam Day) that Nan was beginning to take an interest in her house?

That memorable afternoon, when the new mistress and the old had the great encounter which ended in the elder lady departing in dudgeon to the Dower House across the park, he had, for the first time perhaps in his life, even blamed his mother. Indeed, Lady Anne had had as a consequence such a complete and successful attack of the vapours that no man with the feelings of a man could have done aught but to side with her; especially as Madam Day, of a sturdy, old-fashioned stock (she was a Stanley her-

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self), betrayed throughout the interview no deeper sign of emotion than a tight, one-sided smile of bitter significance.

And then, for the last few days, his Nan had been so coaxing, so engaging! The Squire, with the buoyancy of youth, had told himself that all was coming right. She had ridden with him, walked with him, inquired what flowers the gardeners meant to place in certain beds; superintended herself the planting of her rose-trees; had gone into something bordering on enthusiasm over a brood of ducklings, and had actually consented to take a conciliatory dish of tea with Madam, at the Dower House, *sans trop faire la grimace*.

Perhaps to-day, if he had not roused her from her sleep so suddenly — But no; the little hypocrite had been playing her game! All — all was spoilt to him. And he had been so light-hearted only an hour ago!

Awakening from the heavy muse into which he had fallen on reaching the foot of the stairs, the young Squire strode across the great stone hall, and, giving brief orders

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that the blue roan should be reconducted to the stables, swung himself upon the brown.

“Tell her Ladyship that I may be back late,” he called out from the saddle, and cantered off.

Old Giles looked after him with eyes of pride — such a gallant young figure, the sunshine blazing on his ruddy brown hair!

“His grandfather over again, God bless him!” said Giles, who had been born and bred in the family of Day of Queen’s Compton.



CHAPTER
II

CHAPTER II



HER LADYSHIP held her breath, listening, while the crisp rhythm of the hoofs pulsed in the air and died away. Then she flung herself back among her pillows with a fresh explosion of sobs. Had any three-months' old bride ever been so hardly treated? He did not love her! He could never have loved her, or he could not thus refuse so reasonable, so really so pious a request! Her husband was a monster, a Bluebeard! She, unfortunate, was to be shut up in this silent stone house, a veritable prison, and not even allowed to visit her aged parents—in St. James's Square!

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She sobbed until her own agitation and the want of her breakfast quite overcame her, and she thought she was dying. Then she rang violently for her woman. Eau des Carmes had to be administered, salts to be held under her pretty nostrils, the palms of her hands to be gently slapped. These, and all the other ceremonies demanded by the situation, were briskly gone through by Ma'm'selle Toinette, her Ladyship's tire-woman.

When at last, palpitating, red-eyed, pallid—a very ghost of her who had lifted so rosy a *minois* from her pillow that morning—Lady Anne found herself sufficiently restored to partake of a fresh cup of chocolate, the Frenchwoman had leisure to pick up the fragments of the broken Sèvres on the floor, and, at the same time, to discuss the position of affairs. This latter she did with some airs of familiarity and a great decision of mind.

It was Monsieur who had so agitated Madame?

Oh, he had been so cruel! So unkind!

Unkind! Unkind with that angel which

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was Milady! And Monsieur had gone and left Milady—*pâmée*? He must then have been in great anger.

The Frenchwoman looked curiously at the signs of disaster on the floor.

Alas! it was even so: in anger, most unjust anger!

“Ah!” said Toinette, lighting up with eager malice. “And it is Monsieur who has broke Madame’s pretty Sèvres. Oh, the men, they are all monsters!”

There was a silence. The quick glance, searching Lady Anne’s face, saw with no less satisfaction another side to the situation.

“To think of Monsieur being so violent.” proceeded their owner slyly. “No wonder Milady is ill.”

“’T was not exactly thus,” faltered truthful Anne. “Nay, I scarce know how it happened; but Mr. Day so agitated, so upset me, that the cup slipped from my hand.”

Toinette’s eyes measured the distance which this lively cup seemed to have travelled, and a dry silence ensued. Whereupon Lady Anne, in sheer self-defence, had

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to relapse into swooning, and fresh cordial was administered, somewhat sardonically, by the handmaiden.

Monsieur had refused that Milady should go to the Town! Was it possible? Such a barbarity!

Toinette was very genuinely indignant. She pitied poor Milady—with all her heart she pitied her. From the instant they had set foot in the shadow of this *tombeau*, she, Toinette, had said to herself: To bury my mistress here, one so young, so fair, so universally admired; one, in fact, made to shine like the diamond in the brilliancy of the Great World—the Frenchwoman waved scraps of brown hands in ever more rapid gesticulation—it was assassination! Yes, assassination! Of what good, she would like to know, were Milady's jewels shut up in their cases? What good the jewel of Milady's beauty in this great green box?—“*Tenez, Madame, it is worse than wasted—it suffers, just as Milady's pearls will suffer. Quant à moi,*” said Toinette, “I am persuaded that this greenness is catching—*ça déteint, positivement.* My Lady

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has quite a little shade of it herself this morning.”

Lady Anne reached for her hand-mirror. Her pretty face was certainly pale; but, as for the tip of her pretty nose — well, there was no green there! She threw the mirror from her: the reflection was insulting.

“*Ma foi!* they tell that England is a free country; but to me it seems ’t is free all on one side — all for the gentlemen, while the poor ladies, they are slaves. Ah, ’t is well to be a man! Monsieur Clarence, he say —”

“Monsieur Clarence?” ejaculated Lady Anne, surprised from her angry thoughts.

“Monsieur Clarence, the first of Milady’s new footmen, he says if Madame not go to Town he gives his demission. He fears he grow too rustic for his vocation. He engaged, he says, to see life; and here he sees nothing, he says, but vegetables.”

There fell a pause. Lady Anne vaguely felt that she ought to rebuke her woman for impertinence; yet she had already spoilt her too much to venture.

“If my Lady could coax Monsieur to take

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her — but for a few days —” suggested Toinette insinuatingly. “If only my Lady had got Monsieur away, all to herself —”

“Alas! he is set. Not even for a week with my dear parents,” cried the ill-used wife.

“*Ciel!*” ejaculated Toinette, sitting down on her heels and clasping her brown hands tragically. “Why, my Lady, the Countess-mother, she will be heart-broke!”

Toinette fixed her beady black eyes upon her mistress. Lady Anne looked back, and then, for no apparent reason, coloured to the roots of her fair curls. Yet, if ever there were a laudable aspiration, it would be that of such ardent filial duty.

“And Milord,” said Toinette, dropping her gaze and gingerly picking the last bit of china from the carpet.

“And my father indeed,” acquiesced Lady Anne rather faintly.

“*C'est à n'y pas croire,*” asserted the sou-brette, dabbing a cloth into the chocolate. “And Monsieur appears so devoted, so mad in love! Ah! it is all, no doubt, the old Madame.”

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Lady Anne, in the bed, gulped down her chocolate, that she might not dally with the irresistible vindictive comment: "Old cat!"

"Ah! yes, Milady; it *is* the old Madame. She would bury Milady here in the green. Ah, heavens, that eternal green! She is jealous of Milady with Monsieur. But Milady must not give way."

"I did not," said Lady Anne, with a slight glance towards the floor.

"Milady must act."

Lady Anne raised herself on her pillows and looked wonderingly at her tirewoman. Act! She had acted to some purpose, it seemed to her. What could the creature mean? Again Toinette sat back and contemplated her work, with head on one side.

"There will always be one great stain," she observed philosophically. Then she rose to her feet and looked out of the window at the crest-line of the distant trees, musingly.

"The Reverend and his wife — they go to London to-day," she remarked with apparent

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irrelevance, after a pause. "The Reverend's lady sent up to know if my Lady have any commission for the Town."

"Dr. Dutton going to Town?" said her Ladyship.

"*Mais oui!*" Toinette hitched her lace apron, and found something very interesting to do with one of its rose-coloured bows. "Oh, they will travel in the grand style. My Lord Valentia, he sends a carriage up to Town; and so the Reverence, he graciously says, may have the profit of the journey."

Lady Anne's heart suddenly began to beat with a sense of impending events.

"There will be two seats to spare." Toinette dropped her apron, came over to the bed, parted the curtains at the foot, and looked in upon her mistress, a pair of lively devils dancing in her orbs.

"Toinette!"

"Is not my Lady anxious about the health of Madame the Countess-mère?"

"Oh, Toinette!"

"Who could blame a daughter's hastening to her mother's side? My Lady has had

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correspondence. Some one says the Countess looks so suffering."

Grief vanished. The roses began to mount angrily to Lady Anne's cheeks. Spoilt French-bred child though she was, her native English honesty rebelled against this Gallic guile. The tirewoman was quick to see that she had overshot her point.

"It would serve Monsieur right," she hazarded next. The change of tactics seemed to promise more success: the eyes of the mistress began to flash. "Monsieur will come back and find Madame gone. Then Monsieur will be in all the states — Monsieur so mad about Madame!" A slight dimple peeped in the bride's cheek. "Monsieur will tear his hair." Lady Anne compressed her lips. No doubt the Squire *would* tear his hair. She was almost resolved upon the experiment. "'What have I done?' will Monsieur cry. He will turn on the old Madame. 'What have you made me do?' he will say to her in reproach and anger."

Lady Anne sat up in bed and tossed her lace cap off her head: yes, she would risk it.

"Then," resumed the artful Toinette, "will

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Monsieur go galloping, galloping, up to the Town after Madame. He will fall at her feet. Ah, but then it is she will have it all her own way !”

“ Be silent, Toinette ! Fetch me the escri-toire. Bid the Rectory messenger wait.”

Lady Anne paused awhile. “ I will take the larger carriage-box,” said she decisively.



CHAPTER
III



CHAPTER III

GRAND DIEU, *quelle catastrophe!* Hoity-toity!" said Lady Ongar, "what's to do now?"



"Pack her home," said his Lordship, without looking up from his papers.

He was a lean, dry man, of few words, whose thoughts were all set on political importance, and to whom his family, with their foolish and expensive demands, seemed little but a burden. It was not often that his French wife — the second lady of his choice — bearded him in his den. Even when in urgent need of money she vastly preferred dealing with the family

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steward, according to the custom of her country. But this day's emergency was more than she felt herself able to cope with. That the only one of their children settled in life — and so successfully to boot — should come back to their impecunious home a runaway wife, and demand harbourage, when Teresa and Sophia, her elderly stepdaughters, had almost lost hope, poor things; when Sukey (of her own batch), Sukey had hardly had her innings yet; when Deb was clamouring from the school-room — here was indeed a serious complication. To have back on their hands “the Beauty” who put all the others in the shade, the Beauty with but a couple of guineas in her purse, and a rich husband threatening God knew what in the distance. It was “*mon Dieu*” and “hoity-toity” indeed!

(Lady Ongar had grafted quaint English expletives upon her French idiom.)

“Pack her back,” said Lord Ongar, and re-read the last phrase of his memorandum to my Lord Rockingham.

It was all very well to say “Pack her back.”

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“But she will not go,” the Countess informed him, nearly in tears. “And then, *mon Dieu*, figure yourself the scandal! Who is to keep quiet the *jacaseries* — the *petits potins* — the calumny?”

Lord Ongar looked up again with a frown. Scandal! — Scandal was a thing he could not admit in connection with his family. Where was the delinquent?

Lady Ongar dived through the door and dragged in a half-frightened, wholly petulant Anne, followed by a highly irate Sukey; the latter vowing in loud tones that she would speak to papa herself. Now, if truth be told, had it not been for her dignity, Lady Anne would have been glad enough to depart instantly again for unappreciated Queen’s Compton. It had certainly never entered her calculations that the all-important Lady Anne Day could be received and treated on her return home, by her own people, neither more nor less than as a naughty child. Nor had she quite realised that she had, it seemed, committed a very grievous offence. Therefore there was trepidation in her heart, though her eyes flashed and her lips pouted.

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She was gathering all her forces in the hope of making out a good case for herself, at least to her father (for her mother, who had had the first explanation, appeared to be unable to comprehend anything), when the worthy peer took the wind out of her sails by pronouncing judgment without waiting for the pleading.

“Anne, I understand that you have left your husband without his permission. I am ashamed that a daughter of mine should behave in so foolish and undutiful a manner.”

“’T is n’t fair on me,” put in Sukey. “’T is just like Nan’s selfishness. She has a husband of her own, and she ’d like to keep me from getting one —”

“Silence, *ma fille*,” ordered Lady Ongar, without, however, any effect on irrepressible Sukey, who shrilly proclaimed further that if Nan went to Devonshire House to-night, she, Sukey, should stay at home.

Lord Ongar took off his wig and flung it on the table before him — a sign with him of the utmost exasperation.

“For Heaven’s sake, Erminie, turn out that girl! I shall have the *tic* again, and my

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party is counting on me to-night. As for you, Anne, I shall send a post to your husband to come and fetch you instantly. Till then, and no longer, you can remain under my roof."

"If she goes to the rout to-night—" re-asserted Sukey from outside the door.

Lord Ongar flapped his hands desperately; then he pronounced his fiat:

"Anne shall not leave this house again except in the company of her husband."

The blood rushed furiously to Lady Anne's face, then ebbed away, leaving it unwontedly pale. (Patience, till she found Sukey by herself!) The latter young lady crowed triumph from without, and Lady Anne set her teeth upon her under lip. But worse was yet to come.

"Leave me now," said her father sepulchrally. "Affairs of state await my consideration, and I must even now dispatch this letter."

The matron had another apprehension. "*Mais qui sait?* Perchance Philippe—he may refuse to forgive this ungrateful girl—"

A slight smile of scorn appeared on the

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truant wife's lips. She tossed her head. A likely contingency indeed!

"She must herself write to him and humbly implore forgiveness," added Lord Ongar, fixing his eye witheringly upon her.

Again Anne tossed her curls. That was more likely still!

If life had taught her French Ladyship of Ongar to be fertile in resources, it is to be feared it had also imparted to her a certain callousness with regard to truth.

"If the little stupid one likes to say that 't was the toothache I'll uphold her. *Mon Dieu!* She must tie up her face, and we must bid Mr. Borglum to come and extract a tooth — a tooth at the back!"

Lady Anne uttered a cry of horror and fury.

"The apothecary will tell of it everywhere when he goes to pay his visits to-morrow," pursued Lady Ongar relentlessly, "and *voilà*, the scandal is saved. *Allons*, I'll go and get thee a 'kerchief, Nan," she concluded, raising her voice to drown the bride's expostulations.

Lady Anne whisked herself away from the

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maternal touch — a perfect tornado of protest and defiance. If they dared to touch her, Philip would never forgive them. She hated them all! She wished she had never come! She would write to Philip herself to come and fetch her! The door was slammed upon her tempestuous petticoat.

Lord Ongar removed his neckcloth. And, before this symptom, the Countess herself beat likewise a hasty retreat. Not before, however, she had the vision of her lord, rising in his seat, with one arm stiffly extended; not before the words, preliminary, it would seem, to a lengthy discourse, had fallen upon her ear —

“Ah! Erminie, had it not been for this unhappy French education . . . !”

At Queen's Compton, in the ancient brown and gold library, under the painted gaze of rows of staid ancestors and the sympathetic contemplation of his favourite dog squatting on a chair opposite him, Squire Day sat in unwonted studious attitude before his writing-table, with two letters open before him. His head was propped on his hands; he was

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staring by turns at the outspread sheets. The first was a somewhat lengthy document, strangely creased, as if crumpled by the spasm of an angry grasp, though now again carefully smoothed out. It referred to "my parents"—"the obligations of filial duty"—"a husband's cruelty," and ended up with "Farewell, Philip." Its sentiments were grandiloquent if the spelling was a trifle capricious.

The second letter ran in few words :

Deare Philip, come and fetch me at once.

NAN.

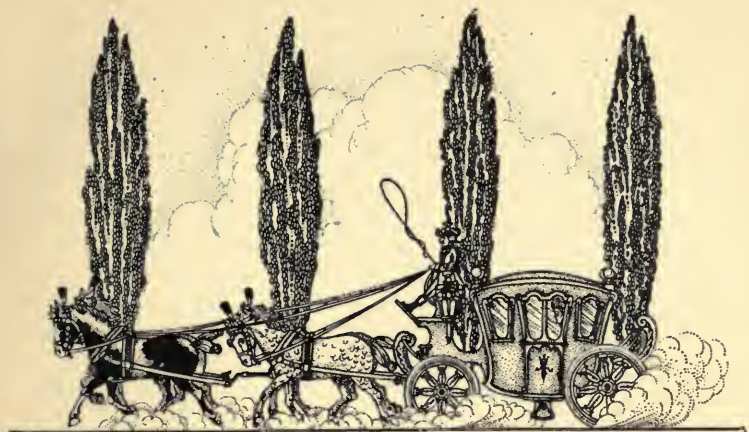
Occasionally whistling under his breath, after a long period of reflection, the young man seemed finally to come to a resolution. He took the crumpled missive, tore it in pieces, and flung it on the floor to join some other fragments which represented the courier of his noble parents-in-law.

"Toothache," looked up at him from one three-cornered bit (in Lady Ongar's own slender French hand), "Wifely subm——" winked at him from another, in his father-in-law's gouty caligraphy. The Squire kicked

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the heap with scornful foot as he rose from his seat.

The smaller billet he weighed a moment in his palm and finally folded and thrust into his pocket. He now whistled out loud as he strode out of the library stablewards; but the unwonted gravity, not to say gloom, upon his countenance did not lighten, even in these congenial surroundings. He made rapid review of all his saddle-horses, and picked out a sturdy half-blood upon which it was his intention to start with all dispatch to London Town.



CHAPTER
IV

CHAPTER IV

LADY ANNE looked askance upon her companion. They had passed Hammersmith Common and reached Turnham Green. The way had been desolate enough ; they had left the idle starers of the town long behind. Toinette sat in the rumble : her mistress had had her own idea in insisting upon this. Husband and wife had therefore the chaise all to themselves, the road all to themselves ; the hour seemed propitious. She

herself had quite got over her not unreasonable pet at being expected to travel in a hired chaise, when her own greys might have been made use of with but a trifling



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expenditure of time, of which surely the travellers had enough to spare.

Where were the Squire's transports, where the gratitude at his Nan's condescension? Where the joy of their reunion? She had expected another wedding journey. Along the self-same road they progressed. And, as she minded, here was that tree passing which he had held her so close; there, that turn of the road where he had gone into a trance over her little foot; yonder, the very inn where he had been forced to unclasp her, yet retained her hand tenderly under the cloak and pressed it all the while the post-boys drank. His present attitude seemed to her strange indeed; and, sooth to say, not at all to her taste.

The Squire was looking out of window with abstracted gaze. If he had had George coachman beside him, he could not have seemed more utterly indifferent. Now, as she began to think over recent events, uneasiness laid hold of her. He had arrived in Town the night before, and had lain at a hostelry in Haymarket. How was it that this proceeding had not struck her before?

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In the whirl of their meeting, under the family eye, he had scarce spoken to her. There was nothing odd in that, however: Philip had ever been silent before her parents. When, disdaining all adventitious excuses (the toothache was repudiated, likewise the bandage, even though Lady Ongar had given in on the subject of the threatened extraction), she had flung herself into his arms, crying, "Take me home, Phil, take me home!" she had flattered herself that here was the most graceful amends it was possible to conceive, and that only an excess of emotion had kept her husband from making any other reply than that of holding her close. He had held her close, as she remembered now, with a revival of the triumph which had induced her then to make a grimace of scorn and derision over his shoulder at envious Sukey—Sukey, who, to be sure, had come to spy the interview, hoping to see the runaway soundly rated.

On the strength of this pleasing memory Lady Anne turned coquettishly to her spouse and laid a finger on his arm. In an instant he was all attention. Did she want any-

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thing? Was she cold? Was she too hot? Did she desire an added mantle or a more open window?

It was the folding of his arms about her that the little lady desired: it was the opening of that pent-up heart. But these wishes, of course, no self-respecting wife can express. Therefore, to keep him at least occupied about her, she had to be cold and then warm and then weary; to change places with him, to try the effect of another cushion, to rest her little feet, in their pretty buckled shoes, upon the opposite seat, artfully peeping from furbelows and flounces. Never a glance, however, did the man cast in the alluring direction. When his eyes rested upon her, there was something in them now that she most sadly missed. And there was also something now that she could very well have spared.

Her position lacking grace, even in her own eyes, she thought to improve it by feigning sleep. She had had but poor nights of late: for Sukey, who objected to her presence, had taken good care always to keep the middle of the bed. And lulled

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now by the motion of the carriage and the enforced tedium, feint soon became reality.

She woke up as rosy as a child, to find their journey nearly concluded.

The shades of evening had begun to fall, and they were drawing close to home. And the prospect of Queen's Compton, majestically isolated though it was, somehow assumed a very different aspect in her mind from that of a few days ago. She thought of its space and luxury, its antique splendours and latter-day comforts almost with tenderness, as contrasted with the shabbiness, the gloom, the mixture of haphazard slovenliness and rigid economy, which characterised the paternal mansion. To reign there as a little queen was, after all, better than to be the unwelcome guest of the crowded London mansion. The prospect of passing most of her days, even the season weeks, in this her palace appeared almost a tolerable prospect; and her childish heart began to turn with more real warmth than it had perhaps yet felt towards him who was the giver of so many good things.

And as her pretty foot once more took

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possession of the home Squire Day had dedicated to her for life, the wave of longing for his love and a tenderness towards him came over her with fresh force. It was strangely uncomfortable for a queen to have the chief of her subjects in this detached mood. Not, indeed, that she could accuse him of being unkind — she would have preferred that. Quarrel would have suited her infinitely better. Never had he been more careful of her comfort, more studiously at her service! But the lover, the comrade — where was he? Bah! she would be a poor thing if she could not win him back, though without derogation from her high-set throne!

As she doffed her travelling gear before the “Psyche” in her room (where two laughing Cupids held bunches of pink wax candles to illumine the fairest reflection that had, *certainly*, ever flashed from crystal) the vision of her own countenance could not but inspire confidence. A little pale it was after these many emotions and the long travel, but this pallor was not unbecoming.

“Toinette!” she cried, twisting round

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upon a very sullen, not to say rebelliously ill-tempered soubrette, whose twitching fingers could scarcely be restrained from snapping her mistress's garments from her back. "Toinette, bid Giles to serve supper in the boudoir, and beg your master to favour me with his company there in half an hour. And then hurry back. I will put on the white satin sacque with the pink quilted petticoat and the Mechlin lace. Well, *êtes vous sourde, Mademoiselle?*"

Toinette's beady eyes were fixed in utter amazement upon her mistress. She had heard, but could not credit the evidence of her ears. Lady Anne had to repeat the order, and with some sharpness. Then, shrugging her plump shoulders, casting up her hands and rolling the same black orbs, Toinette left the apartment in a series of protesting jerks. Of a surety her Ladyship was a little mad. *Mon Dieu!* No wonder Englishmen were tyrants. How would not her former lady (of Versailles) have treated the *mari récalcitrant!* Supper in the boudoir—*passé encore*. And had there been a *joli cavalier* handy—*à la bonne heure*. But

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Monsieur — *à la porte*, Monsieur — ah, for sure, yes — *à la porte!* until he whined to be let in, like a dog.

Lady Anne fastened a pink rose in the curls above her ear. And, looking like nothing more than a pink-and-white flower herself, she tripped into her pink-and-white boudoir upon the most confident feet in all the world. Toinette's very lip of disdain, each of that damsel's sarcastic glances, had but pointed her mistress's success. If ever she had been irresistible, the Vertcœur beauty was irresistible to-night. Her smile and the gleam of her eye in concert spoke triumph; she broke in upon waiting Philip, as the rose of dawn on a dark sky.

So occupied with her own effect was she that she hardly paused to note how her husband received the shock of so much loveliness. He certainly looked at her very hard as she came in, and that was enough for Nan. All rustling silks and little airs and graces, she settled herself in her seat. Old Giles stared too. And Clarence, the disappointed, could scarce lift the covers, so engaged was he upon the apparition.

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“ I think,” said my Lady coquettishly, “ that we may dispense with the servants’ presence to-night. Can we not, Philip ? ”

The Squire made sign of the hand, without otherwise replying. And in another moment they were alone.

“ Will you have mince, my love ? ” said the lady. “ ’Tis the recipe of my uncle, the Grand Chambellan. *Suprême* — that is how he dubbed it.” She helped from the dish before her, with a great play of wrist. “ Nay, do not stir,” she proceeded. “ It is my pleasure to attend on my guest ; for you are my guest to-night, are you not, Sir ? ” She was bending over him with all her filmy laces ; one long perfumed curl brushing his cheek.

“ What’s that ? ” said the Squire, moving a little from the contact, and rubbing the said cheek, as he might have done had some tiresome fly lighted upon it. “ Nay, my dear, thank you. None of these kickshaws for me. I see that here is some spiced beef of my mother’s good old English recipe ; ’twill suit my palate better.”

With a whisk, Lady Anne withdrew the

despised *suprême* and set it down in her own place. She began to pick at it herself, in some dudgeon. 'T was a most dainty dish for the nibbling of a poetic lady — creamy-white and velvety, with a subtle perfume of green pistachios — but it might have been sawdust, for all she tasted to-night. She looked across the table with resentful eyes at her Squire. Positively, he had not even changed his travelling garb: what a companion for a lady's boudoir! As she looked, he suddenly — yes, he stifled a yawn. Ah, my God, why had she ever left Versailles?

Philip Day suddenly looked up, caught his wife's glance, and smiled. He was, in truth, sadly tired, poor man. His comely fresh countenance was worn and spent. He had passed most of the night in the saddle, determined as he was to leave his wife not an hour longer in London than he could help. A hundred and twenty miles, taking it all, had he ridden and posted within the thirty-six hours. Very little food had passed his lips, no sleep had descended on his eyes; for anger and grief went deep with him, for



"MIGHTY SORE AT HEART"—Page 59

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all his taciturnity on the subject. Now he was both hungry and tired, and still mighty sore at heart. It was small wonder, perhaps, that the pink-and-white vision should fail of its purpose.

“You’re very fine to-night, Nan,” said he, as he smiled, “and Queen’s Compton should be prodigiously flattered. But are not these fallals something out of place? Have you not, among all your things, a cambric or a muslin? We hardly know what to make of such fine ladies in the country.”

Annie bit her swelling lip. Her dishes were kickshaws, her gowns fallals!

Squire Day devoted himself to his spiced beef with a good appetite.

“You would wish to see me robed like your mother, no doubt,” said her Ladyship, as soon as she could command her voice sufficiently to speak.

He rose from his chair, and helped himself liberally from a jug of home-brewed that stood, quaintly enough, upon an inlaid Buhl table behind him, by the side of the gold-leafed bottle of Sillery.

“I think,” he said, passing the napkin

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over his white-frothed lips, "I think, my little woman, that you could learn a good many things from my mother and be none the worse from it."

He spoke kindly; almost tenderly, indeed. But had he ransacked through his honest mind for a phrase better calculated to exasperate the poor Court beauty he could scarce have found it.

"I wonder why you ever sought me out!" she cried in a choking voice.

"Sometimes I wonder at it too," he answered her.

Now a gleam of the old ardour had come back to his eyes as he looked upon her saying this, and his bantering tone was but one of loving mockery. Had she been less mortified in her vanity, less determined, therefore, to take offence, she must have felt the hidden caress of the words, and the next instant have been in his arms. As it was, she chose to consider herself insulted, and flung him anger from her blue eyes. She sprang up from her chair and ran, suffocating, into her own apartment, never doubting but that he would be after her in an instant, stam-

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mering apologies and protestations which it would be her pleasure to rebuff till he be reduced to proper despair.

He looked after her with a sigh; and smiled again, half indulgently, half wearily.

“They have spoiled the sweetest child that ever breathed, with their French nonsense,” said he to himself. “Well, I must teach her her lesson,” sighing again. “She’ll come to my call yet.” He leaned his tired head on his hand.

Within, Anne waited. She had left the door ajar. At first the beating of her own heart drowned all other sounds; but, as it calmed down dully, the silence became oppressive. Presently she sat on her divan, and gave herself to the rarest of all occupations with her—that of reflection. In a little while the angry, woe-begone expression faded from her features. A small engaging smile began to dimple her lips. (Perhaps the Squire was right in thinking she was the sweetest child in all the world.) She crept on tiptoe towards the door, and closed it with precaution. And then, after locking the outer door to guard against Toinette’s

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intrusion, she proceeded to divest herself of her laces and taffetas with hasty fingers.

From the depths of the cedar-wood press she now carefully selected a muslin wrapper of the most delicate simplicity. The dimples deepened as she donned it before the mirror. Then, after pulling the magnificent erection of her headdress to pieces, she shook her curls loose over her shoulders, brushed the powder from their corn-yellow as well as she could, and once more bent her steps towards the boudoir. It was a smiling, blushing Nan, gentle, timid, adorably ashamed, that peeped into the pink-and-white room.

Alas! Philip neither looked up nor stirred. With his head upon his hand, he was fast asleep.

Nan stared a second, hardly able to believe her eyes. Asleep, and she had been well-nigh in tears when she left him! They had parted in anger, and he could sleep while she — she —

The injured wife closed the door with a slam calculated to awaken the Seven Sleepers. All was over! She rushed to the further

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door and unlocked it, and set the bell pealing furiously for Toinette.

“I go to bed,” she informed the woman briefly.

The latter flung an acute look at her mistress, and sagaciously perceived that now was not the moment for any observations.

When the yellow-curled head was on the pillow, the lady, in a hard voice, gave her last orders —

“*Pousse le verrou du boudoir, ma fille — et mets en poche la clef de l'autre porte.* I am exhausted with fatigue, and so you will not disturb me in the morning.”

The Frenchwoman smiled grimly to herself as she pushed the bolt. She chuckled out loud in the passage as she pocketed the key.



CHAPTER
V

CHAPTER V



MY little dear friend [wrote Lady Kilcrouney], you give me no answer about the mansion in St. James's Square, yet it is the very place for you. I have bid the creatures, on their lives, close with no other bargain till your word comes. And now I hear that you have been in Town and gone back! And I would not credit it were it not 't was your own mother told me. The dear lady prated I know not what of toothache; but then blushed and grew confused when I pressed the question and told her 't was not like my Nan to have aught wrong with her pretty teeth, or — what more nearly touches me — with her own true heart. And yet your heart would be much amiss if you could come so near me and give no sign! So, as Kilcrouney says — you know his Irish way — 't is evidently not in your rosy mouth the shoe pinches. And, indeed, my dear, I scent, to use your French

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proverbs, *anguille sous roche*. And that same eel — or, let me be more appropriate, that rock — is, I take it, the Squire, your husband.

What do the little birds whisper of a country gentleman galloping all night to tear his bride from her very parents' arms and carry her with him back to the depths of the country? A green bridegroom — a Bluebeard — so fond, so jealous, so exacting! Ah, my love, you do well to come to me in your troubles! How well I know the creatures! Could I not write a book of rules for young wives? But, la, 't would never do to give away my secrets, and my Kilcronney knows not yet (nor shall ever) *how* he is led, nor even that he *is* led. The dear fool is beginning to think he is a tyrant. Oh, Nan, how much you have to learn!

Well, your letter lies before me; the letter penned last week before this sudden secret visit to the Town. You tell me, poor soul, that your Squire has vowed by all his rural deities that he will make an English country-wife of French Nan. You tell me that he has a prodigious dame of a mother who is teaching you to churn! Why, what is the world coming to? Does he think a rose of Trianon will turn cabbage at his bidding? You vow, however, that you can manage him and will have your season yet, and that I am to seek you a house. And now your own silence — your mother's determined assertion — "*mais non, pas question de quitter la campagne*" — inform me that

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you have failed. Fie! My dear, I will not admit failure for my sex! Why not come to me for a week, or longer, if you will — or as long, indeed, as it may pleasure your heart? Young husbands and obstinate Squires should be made to understand the difference between Versailles flowers and Hampshire cabbages. It would do no harm, I take it, to let *your* monster study this text in solitude — or in no better company than his good mother of dairy fame. Heavens! my sweet love, how I hate that woman out of my love for you! Anne, you positively must see the mansion in St. James's Square. Who knows? You will be gay in my house, *ma petite belle Anne*, and a little jealousy in the matrimonial heart — it has been known to work wonders. Chut! chut! When we wives conspire we must even write in whispers!

Answer me "Yes," Nan; or, better still, answer me in person. Your rooms are ready, and my saucy slut of a Lydia is sharpening her nails against the coming of your French minx.

Your expectant and devoted K. K.

Thus Kitty Kilcrony, the richest and most popular woman in London this season, who, on a brief visit to Paris, had sworn sudden but tender friendship with Lady Anne Vertcœur that was then — Squire Day's Nan that was now.

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Lady Anne read the letter with vague eyes; sighed, smiled, laughed a little, was interested in spite of herself; and then cast it on one side.

Dressed at an unwonted early hour, she had broken her fast alone. She had not seen the Squire since she had looked with so much disfavour upon his sleeping countenance the night before. And now she expected their next meeting with a beating heart. How angry he would be! Oh, how angry!

But she did not care. Had she not a right to be angry too? In truth she expected *la grande scène*. She desired it. Must it not end up with a passionate reconciliation? Yet the sound of his voice on the terrace beneath made her start. She held her breath, hiding behind the curtain, peeping, and listening. Alack! French Nan, so far, had failed to forecast in the least particular what her English husband's attitude would be.

His voice rang out cheerfully. He was walking and talking with the dame, his mother — Laughing too! A sob rose in

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Lady Anne's throat. She could see them now: Philip, fresh, handsome, gay; the old lady's smooth, apple-blossomed cheek, under the shade of her garden-hat, the strings of her goffered cap tied under her substantial chin.

"And where is Anne?" her mother-in-law was saying in good-humoured, commanding tones, halting beneath the window and looking up. "Must I not scold the naughty baggage for this escapade?"

"Nan!" answered Philip, with a laugh — a quite heart-whole laugh. "Why, the little puss has scarce begun to lick up her chocolate yet, if, indeed, she be awake."

"Ah, Phil," said Mrs. Day solemnly, "scold her for these late hours —"

And he answered her, his voice fading as they drew away: "She has much to learn, never fear, but I shall teach her yet — teach her with a kiss —"

Nan clenched her hand and stamped. She hated them — oh, how she hated them! So did they speak of her? With such easy contempt, as if she were the veriest child.

With a pounce, not unlike the puss to which her husband had mockingly compared

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her, she flung herself on Lady Kilcrone's letter again. With new eyes she read it: and new intentions sprouted in her mind.

A light swinging tread, accompanying a humming song, came down the corridor. He could hum, he could laugh, he could joke! He looked so brisk and rested — and she had not slept a wink all night! She had cried till she was a positive fright. She was to be taught, with a kiss, forsooth! Nay, 't was he should learn, and not with kisses. How was it Kitty put it? Kitty knew, if any one did. Had she not had experience — both of an old husband and a young? Who could advise better than Kitty Kilcrone, the celebrated Kitty Bellairs that was, of whom the worldly fame had been so wide?

One less childish than French Nan, one with soberer blood in her veins, would have instantly perceived that Squire Day's cheerfulness scarcely rang as true as usual; that his breeziness was somewhat elaborate. Indeed, he had passed the first part of his night of exile in as fine a passion as even she could have desired. But after some reposeful sleep

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had come better counsels. His wife was still a child—a spoilt child at that; she should be controlled and guided, with all tenderness; taught, indeed, with a kiss. Now that he had her safe back again, Heaven preserve that he should play the pedagogue! Let her have her tantrums—she would the sooner weary of them when she found they altered in no way his serenity of humour. As to those drawn bolts, he would not pretend to have noticed them, that she might be the sooner ashamed of such petty vengeance. The foolish, pettish dear! If she was to sulk every time he fell asleep after a hard day's riding, what would it be when the hunting began? Nay, by that time, 't was to be hoped, the Frenchwoman would have learned good English simplicity, and the fine Versailles lady have been transformed into the country Squire's helpmate. As to her recent escapade, 't was over and done with, and all resentment was already fading from his wholesome nature. On that subject he would never utter a single reproach.

It was in this generous mood, in this de-

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terminated wise humour, that he entered the boudoir, and found awaiting him a very spitfire.

“Good den to you, Nan,” was his greeting. He flung an arm about her; felt her rigid unresponsiveness, and drew back to look at her with countenance changing. “Still in the sulks?” quoth he, all his good resolutions slipping away. Then, catching himself, and with another quick alteration of tone: “Art pale this morning, child! Hast slept ill?” His voice wavered towards tenderness.

But she, galled to the quick (ye gods, how clumsy are the best-intentioned men at times!): “I pale?” she cried. “’Tis but the reflection of your odious trees. I have had a notable good night, thank you. A better night than Queen’s Compton has been wont to afford me.”

“Nay, then, ’t is good hearing,” retorted he. He was, after all, as young a husband as she a wife! “For I too have slept like the famed Seven. We should both feel mighty good-tempered this morning,” he added with a satiric laugh.

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She yawned, for all answer — curling up her small rosy tongue like the little cat she was. He stood, looking at her, as some mastiff might regard a quarrelsome puss, ready to growl or to wag his tail according to her mood, but with no sort of intention of hurting the incomprehensible thing.

She shot him a sidelong look, all her claws out. Then she spat the first defiance —

“’T is a vast pity that you hurried me thus out of London yesterday.”

“How, now?”

“Why, in the first place, you were so prodigious fatigued, Sir.”

“Did you hear me complain?”

“Why, no offence — no offence in sooth!” she tittered acidly. “If my wifely solicitude —”

“Oh, Nan! Wifely solicitude!”

“Yes, Sir, I am with you there — ’t is prodigious misplaced. You were not fatigued last night — you were but out of manners. Well, you will grant me liberty to regret a useless journey on my own account, I trust —”

He drew a chair to the table and sat

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down, his chin upon his clenched hand, fixing her intently with his eyes. She might have been warned by the cold airs of composure that were settling upon him. She might have been warned, but Nan was of those who have to be taught by experience. He did not speak, but waited for her to proceed. And this she presently did, with some difficulty and all the more petulance.

“Had you not been in this desperate hurry, Sir, in that massacring post-chaise of yours, I should not now have all the fatigue of the return journey before me.”

Still the waiting eyes and the ominous tranquillity. Why did he not speak? She must scratch deeper, then; for this was more than an angry kitten could endure.

“My Lady Kilcrouney has done me the honour to invite me to her house in London —”

She had flung her supreme challenge. Did he guess that she only meant to provoke him? — that she had no more intention of leaving him than he could have of allowing her to go? But in the whirl of anger that came upon him, a search after hidden in-

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tentions was the last of his thoughts. Outwardly he kept up his singular stony taciturnity. He would give her full scope. Suddenly she began to tremble.

“Oh, I know what you would say, Sir. Believe me, I am quite prepared for your tyranny. I know your English ideas of a wife’s duty and of a husband’s authority. But you forget I have been brought up in a country where a lady’s wishes are regarded as sacred, a country where a gentleman would believe himself unworthy of the name did he not seek to please, to serve the one he professes to love. I have been ill-educated for your British notions.”

“You have, indeed,” said the man in a grave voice.

She was charmed to have been interrupted at last; charmed to have the excuse of launching herself upon a full tide of recrimination.

“It would have been fairer had I been warned,” she panted; “had I but been told that this great desolate barn, of which I heard such *monts et merveilles*, was to be my Bastille; that, when I signed the mar-

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riage register, I was but subscribing a *lettre de cachet* for myself — had I been but told I might perchance have hesitated, Sir, before trusting my life to you.”

Squire Day lifted his head and looked slowly round the rich and delicate room, where all the love that he had lavished upon his bride had reached a wonderful climax of expression — then he rose and walked over to the window and looked forth upon flower-wreathed terraces, where the peacocks flaunted; upon falling greensward that had been velvet for centuries, melting into the wider green of the great park, with its belt of noble trees, its dotted herds of deer, its gleam of living waters where the river ran. He looked upon the hundred evidences of that mellow, antique prosperity typical of an old English estate, with its stamp of all that was best of English stateliness and English strength. This was her Bastille, and he, in his love and patience, her jailer!

The blood rushed to his head for a second. The golden green before him turned crimson. He was shaken all over his massive

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frame with hitherto unknown anger. Prison — jailer! Very well, let her go!

Then, in sheer apprehension of his own fury, he perforce donned his mask of iron again.

Coming back to where she stood, in all her naughtiness, tearing at the lace of her handkerchief with her small teeth, he spoke, in a low voice, but distinctly:

“When do you wish to start, Nan?”

She flung up her head to stare. Amazement dried the tears in her eyes, and there crept into their blue depths something besides surprise — fear. She could not have heard aright.

“I — start?”

“Ay,” said he, “for my Lady Kilcroneys. When? To-day, if you wish.”

She still stared at him blankly. To be allowed to go from him thus and without a word! But pride rushed to her aid: she tossed her head, the colour of the rose came leaping back to her cheek.

“To-day? By all means,” quoth she. “Perchance the post-chaise may be returning.”

“Oh,” said he, with a sort of bitter gaiety, “have you not your greys, my Lady?”

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“You are vastly generous, Sir.”

“Nay, ’t is not my way,” answered he; and behind all the barrier of ice that he had set between himself and her, she might have felt stormy waters swelling, “’t is not my way to take back a gift. But you will need to hasten,” he added drily, “unless ’t would please you to lie twice upon the road.”

“Nay — I will hasten, by all means!” she retorted quickly; and yet she stood rooted, with none of that impatience her words would have expressed.

“I shall do myself the honour to escort you. Reassure yourself — on horseback.”

He made her a very low bow, and went forth.

With her memories of Versailles and Paris it had pleased Her Petulance to look down upon him more or less as a mere country Squire; but never even at Court (she thought now to herself) had she seen a man bow with a nobler dignity or leave her with a better grace.

The four greys drew the blue-and-silver chariot through the great gates of Queen’s

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Compton with a very fine dash. And Clarence footman, and Toinette tirewoman, were wreathed in smiles as they felt themselves whirled away from the doldrums of country existence to the joys of the Town. But within the carriage, in great state, all alone, sat the woe-begone Lady of Queen's Compton, and saw terraces, peacocks, and gateways whirl past her through a mist of tears.

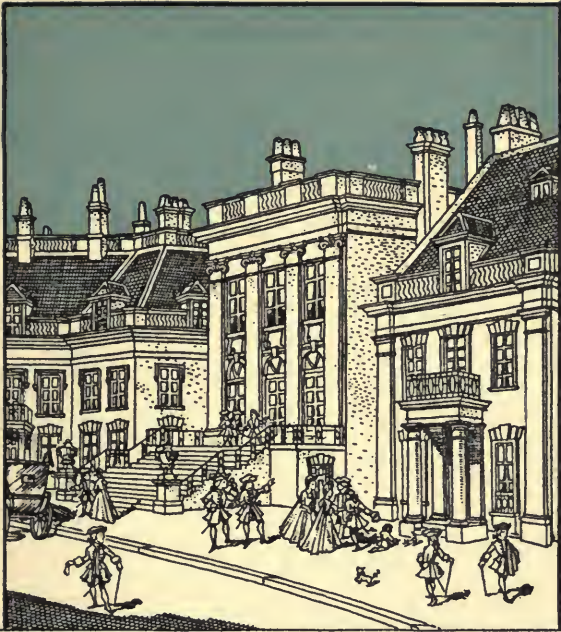
George, the second coachman, jogging on ahead with musketoon on saddle-bow, had nigh as melancholy a countenance as his mistress: for the Squire had informed him he would have to be in attendance in Town on her Ladyship for as long as it might pleasure her to remain there.

The Squire himself, swinging behind the carriage at a slow trot, wore an impassive look—the look that had checked his mother's remonstrances in full flood, a look before which Nan's heart sank each time she peeped back at him stealthily at a turning of the road.

That night, as they lay at Slough, Toinette received no orders anent the bolting of

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doors, in the great best chamber, yclept "Harmony." But if forty bolts had been drawn, Squire Day would have been none the wiser in his solitary room, perversely dubbed "Jollity," at the end of the passage.



CHAPTER

VI



CHAPTER VI

LADY ANNE'S heart was as heavy as the purse of gold the Squire had put into her hands (to meet her more immediate needs) as he parted from her on the doorsteps of Lady Kilcrouney's house in Hertford Street, Mayfair.



For there he had parted from her, with no nearer touch than the conferring of the coin to her keeping, and no tenderer phrase than :

“ You can draw upon Drummond's Bank, in Spring Gardens, when you require more. They shall have my instructions.”

Thereupon, with a flourish of his hat (ironical in its French style) he had left her, even as the folds of the front door

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were being flung open by Lady Kilcroney's porter.

"It's never Nan!" cried the lady of the house from the top of the first stairs, in tones of the liveliest astonishment. "Why, my bird, you must have flown!" And Lady Anne, somewhat comforted by the clasp of Kitty Kilcroney's plump arms, was dragged into a white-and-gold drawing-room, stared at, re-embraced, and again relinquished for a fresh stare of surprise.

"Alone, Nan? Not alone, surely — not a runaway again? Ah, the birds, you see — your fellow-birds *will* twitter! I know some secrets. You've never run away from the dairy a second time? Why, I shall be having your good Squire besieging my front-door with all his plough-boys and hay-makers."

The tone was light, but there was some anxiety in Kitty's brown-pansy eyes as they roamed beyond her friend and her friend's woman towards the empty stairs.

"Nay," said Lady Anne, sinking into a chair. "My husband has given full consent. Nay, he has even escorted me to your door." And as she spoke her heart swelled so sud-

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denly that she had to clench her teeth to keep back a rising sob.

“What!” exclaimed Kitty, clasping her hands. There was a sudden gleam of mischief in her dark orbs. “What! So ready to be rid of you already? Dear me, the luck of some people! And you but three months wed! There’s my Kilcroney, after three years, so great a fool about me still that ’t is positively embarrassing.” She tried to draw her happy lips into scorn, but it was the most lamentable failure.

“Ready to be rid of me?” echoed French Nan, taking fire at the suggestion. “Would it were so!” she cried, striving angrily to meet the woman of the world on her own airy ground. “But, to say truth, I—I believe—I gather—he is vastly offended at my wishing to come to you.”

She tossed her head and set the plume of her fine travelling-hat dancing with an assumption of mighty indifference.

Lady Kilcroney brought a taper nail to the corner of her lip, after her fashion when she was reflective, and contemplated her friend a moment without speaking. Then

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she suddenly became aware of the waiting tirewoman's curious black gaze fixed upon them from the landing, and clapped the door sharply in her face.

"So *Monsieur le mari* is sulky?" she inquired then.

"Nay, I care not what he is."

"And he would not even enter the house to make my acquaintance. 'T was scarce courteous. I am dying with curiosity to see him who won my Nan."

"Oh, won!" commented the bride, with another jerk of the plumed hat.

"Nan!" cried Kitty Kilcrouney suddenly, springing upon her visitor, catching her by the elbow, perforce pulling her from her seat and into a fantastic dance down the polished length of the room; "'t is the best thing that ever happened to you that you should have come to me. I see it; I feel that you were making the most prodigious mess of your life that ever woman made. You babe! You little infant bride! You poor innocent! You little dear green-goose! Why, you've no more notion how to deal with a man than a kitten has of cards. My dear, you and

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your bucolic Squire were on the road to hate each other. . . . Ha! I wish I were as sure of winning my next main at the Buckinghamshires' as I am sure that you've nagged the man. And then, I dare swear, you made little of yourself, to make up for it. Nay, by that blush 't is all revealed. And — oh, dear! — I'll lay my life, you've been more French at his Queen's Compton than any at Versailles, and — and you'd put yourself under his boots now to get him back to you. Oh, thank your stars, my love, that you are with me! He must languish, Nan, he must languish. The monster! The monster! What, he never made a fight to keep you? What, he brings you himself to the house of the most fashionable woman in London? What, you're to be free to enjoy yourself; you, a three-months' wife? Ha, Nan, 't is clever, I warrant you; but by my honour as Kitty Kilcrouney, he shall not win the trick! Oh, my love, how uncomfortable we're going to make him; how dashingly we shall cut it; how many tongues we shall set wagging upon a dozen different tracks! We shall have him up, raging, from his pastures. And

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yet shall he have so many rivals to kill that he shall not be able to fix on one. Oh, Nan! we shall teach him that he must not stake so great a treasure on a game of his own."

The little lady stopped, breathless, and sank, laughing, into the beflowered downiness of the *Bergère*. And, glancing up at the fair, sensitive face that in turns flushed and paled, flashed and clouded under the shade of the great black-and-white hat, she concluded between gasps of mingled mirth and tenderness:

"And if we do not set London wild between us — I with my dark eyes, you with your blue — then I know not the meaning of a good hand of cards. We were made to set each other off, sweet Nan! And now" — she rose, and was the pretty, solicitous hostess — "and now you shall have your Bohea and a rest in your chamber (and a little nap, if you can), for I have a trifle of a rout here to-night, as Kilcronev has it, and your eyes must be at their brightest. And under the inspiration of this dish of tay — the Queen has no better; 't is one of my poor

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Bellairs's old friends in the East that keeps me supplied — we shall make a little list of all the fine beaux who would be for ever my enemies if I did not give them the chance of meeting my French Nan this evening. For you have met some of them already — you have captivated many of our travelling sparks, over there, in your French home.”

Kilcrone's pretty Viscountess had been granted by fate so eminently satisfactory an existence that her talent for intrigue, her extraordinary gift for the conduct of complications, had been positively wasted these three years. It was a charming sensation to find her dimpled hands active once more, if only in somebody else's pie.

“Yes, there's my Lord Damory,” said Nan.

“Lord Damory!” echoed Kitty, with a curl of the lip and a look of fond pity at her friend. “Why, you poor chit, I could buy you a better fop for a farthing.”

“'T is my cousin,” said Lady Anne, flushing.

“And more's the pity, for, as my O'Hara would say, there's an elegant situation wasted entirely.”

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“Then there’s Lord Sanquhar.” Lady Anne spoke in tones of elaborate indifference; but from the corner of her innocent eye she thoroughly enjoyed Lady Kilcrouney’s start and sudden glance of surprise, not to say annoyance.

“Lord Sanquhar! Nay; that is indeed a very different person. Why, child, how come you with the name of Lord Sanquhar on your lips?”

“He did me the honour to be prodigious assiduous in his attentions last year in Paris.”

“He’s half a devil, I think,” said Kitty. “And to say truth, such a hand with the dice that, my own lord being too sorely given that way, I have hitherto refrained from encouraging his company.”

“’Tis reputed of him,” said Lady Anne, in her sweet, childish voice, “that he has sworn no dark woman was worth the looking on.”

The two measured each other. Anne’s eyes were still very soft and guileless, but my Lady Kilcrouney’s danced with little steely sparks.

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“ My dearest angel,” she said silkily, after the pause, “ I shall send the footman round to Lord Sanquhar’s immediately. You need have no fear.”

“ And then there ’s Sir James Devlin.”

“ Sir James Devlin ! ”

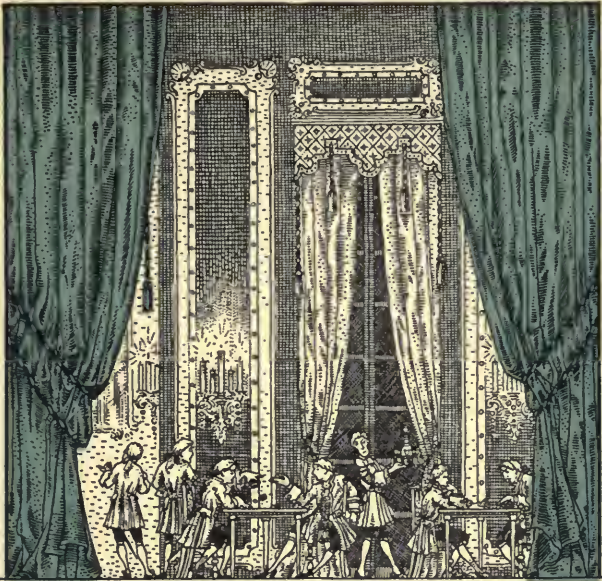
Lady Kilcrony now regarded her visitor with a distinct increase of respect, if with still less tenderness.

“ Have you his acquaintance ? ” quoth Anne.

“ Oh, ay,” said Kitty drily. “ He comes, I believe, to-night.” Then she added with sudden earnestness, “ ’T is the devil in person. Nan, beware of James Devlin.”

“ I hope I can take care of myself,” said the Squire’s lady, tossing her plumes.

“ I hope so too,” said Kitty, with some asperity.



CHAPTER
VII

CHAPTER VII

LADY ANNE propped her flushed cheek on her hand.

“Pray,” said she plaintively, “how, then, do matters stand between us? I fear I have lost count, and in truth my head swims.”

They were seated, Lady Anne Day and my Lord Sanquhar, at a little table somewhat apart from the others in my Lady Buckinghamshire’s great gay drawing-room. The amber folds of the silk window-curtain behind her threw the pearly shades of

her dainty head, the faint mauve shimmer of her gown, into relief under the gleam of the four wax candles that illuminated their window-corner.



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Lord Sanquhar pushed the candlestick before him on one side, that he might the better gaze at his antagonist. He marked the quiver of her lip under the teeth that fain would hold it steady, the fear that dilated her eyes as she looked back at him across a formidable array of notes; and a look between tenderness and cruelty came upon his handsome sensual countenance. He stretched out a long thin hand and gathered the papers from before her to spread them under his own glance; ran his finger-nail along them in brief calculation, then raised his eyes once more and suddenly smiled. Anne caught her breath; she scarce knew why, but his smile terrified her.

“What have I lost to you?” she whispered, leaning across.

“Oh, why should you trouble?” said he; “such pretty heads as yours were never meant for the ugly game of figures. You owe me nothing. Nay, ’t is I owe you for many a rousing game and something else—” His voice sank. “Shall I tear up these silly bits of paper?”

Pallor and flush passed across her face

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almost as rapidly as the panting breath between her lips.

“Sir, my Lord — nay, Lord Sanquhar, you insult me! Oh, indeed, you do me very grievous wrong if you suppose that I would accept” — her breast heaved — “that I am in need of accepting any such favour. We played for fair stakes. Before the last throw I owed you some two hundred pounds, and again I lost. I never was a good arithmetician, Sir,” said Nan, pride lending strength to her voice and driving away her former sense of apprehension, “but I trust that I know enough about figures not to risk more than I can pay.”

“Oh, you will pay, my Lady Anne, sure enough,” said Lord Sanquhar, bowing with a very deep air of courtesy across the table to her. “I crave your pardon, but such a misapprehension was far indeed from my thoughts. Shall we have it, now, that you owe me two hundred and fifty pounds? Alas, alas! why should the fates thus pursue me when I should so fain owe to you? Shall we rest on this? You are tired.”

Nan pressed her fingers over her eyes for

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a second. It seemed to her that these ten days since she had taken up her abode with Lady Kilcrouney were like nothing on earth more than the days of a fever that she had had as a child — they went so fast and yet seemed eternal! The hours lost their usual significance. It was no sooner morning than it was night; and night was no time for sleep, and yet was full of lurid dreams. Minutes held eternities, and nevertheless Life was rushing with her she knew not whither. And she could not stop. She was herself and not herself; and she would wake and be the old little Nan, only to look with terror on what some new strange Nan had done.

Just now, as she thought of the cool green woods, the pine solitude, the wholesome, happy life at Queen's Compton under her husband's sheltering love, she could have sobbed aloud. Why had some mad Nan, that was not she, taken to gaming? Before heaven, she did not know! No more than she knew why she had allowed Lord Sanquhar to monopolise her, four nights out of the five; and why had she coquetted the more,

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the more people had whispered and looked askance at them.

Now she had lost two hundred and fifty pounds! Two hundred and fifty pounds that, in connection with all her other extravagances, would run the credit—that generous credit the Squire had allowed her at his bank—very low; so low indeed that she would have to apply for fresh funds before she could pay her milliner's account, the total of which—she had so bad a head for figures—she could only dimly guess at. The thought was intolerable. Yesterday she had won. There was no reason why she should go on losing this evening.

“Nay,” she said quickly, dropping her hands; “surely, my Lord, the evening is but just begun.”

She stretched out her fingers for the dice-box.

He had been watching her with an air of benevolent patience. His clean-cut face had an almost statuesque repose, and his full lips were serenely set; but this appearance of impassivity was on occasions strangely contradicted by the quivering of thin nostrils.

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And how they quivered as Lady Anne's fingers closed upon the dice-box! A spirit of passion and triumph breathed from his face, for whomsoever could read it. Slowly he pushed back the pieces of paper towards the centre of the table.

"Double, then, or quits?" he asked. Then catching himself up: "Nay, what am I saying? 'T is so much against my practice to play thus with a fair adversary. Nay, Lady Anne, a little stake for little hands!"

"Double or quits!" cried she, fluttering anger like a child.

They flung, and she won.

"Now do I bless the fickle gods!" cried he, tearing up the scraps of paper with a fine play of fingers. "Now, Lady Anne, never another toss between us: for to have you owe to me — oh, 't was hideous, 't was an intolerable burden!"

He flung the pieces of paper on the floor and took up the dice-box. Then the devil entered into Nan again. She hesitated, half rose, sat down. And he, holding her with all his mind, while feigning not to heed or care what she did, had again that ominous

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quiver of eagerness in the wings of his nostrils.

“Would you end the game now that my luck has turned?” taunted she.

They staked. She lost. They doubled again and once again she lost.

“You owe me a thousand pounds,” he said, in quite another voice.

She stared at him aghast. A clamour of bells tolled calamity in her ears: “A thousand pounds, a thousand pounds!” The murmur of voices about her sounded suddenly far away, unreal. Some one laughed shrilly:

“My Lady Kilcrone’s luck again!”

Some one groaned:

“Luck is it? Sure, it’s mine’s the devil’s own! But there, never say die, say I—and say dice when you can. Hurroosh, boys, I’m for it again!”

The Irish accent sounded vaguely familiar. Lord Sanquhar leaned over the board and lightly touched one of Lady Anne’s inert hands. She started violently and looked at him with wakening eyes, the blood rushing back to her face. Was it possible she

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had been near swooning? How humiliating! He was still leaning across the table, his hand ready to lay itself upon hers again.

“Say but the word,” he said, as once before, “and you owe me nothing.”

But Anne, for all her youth, was no baby in the world’s ways. Her French training, if it had had disadvantages, had at least taught her that a man’s code of honour in dealing with a woman is one that every woman should most profoundly distrust. It was terrible to owe a thousand pounds; but might it not be worse still to owe this man gratitude? And yet she hesitated.

Two players, who were occupying a table in a distant corner, here suddenly broke up their game; one of them strolled towards the window embrasure and halted behind Lord Sanquhar’s chair to make a bet on his next throw. The other, concealing his face with his hat, which he used as a fan (with a natural enough gesture on this sultry night), went and leaned against a pilaster; and with his back half turned to the company, seemed to gaze absently into the night.

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Lord Sanquhar drew himself up and flung a swift look over his shoulder.

“You ’ll get no sport here, Jim,” said he airily. “Lady Anne and myself have done with play, and are but conversing together for the present.”

“Nay, my Lord,” retorted the other, “I trow you that you could both still afford me a pretty wager. Shall I lay you ten to one that I guess how it stands between her Ladyship and yourself?”

“Oh, pray, gentlemen,” said Nan, a fresh alarm springing into her eyes, “can you find no better excuse than myself for the bandying of your money?”

“I would I could,” said Jim Devlin, looking at her very straight.

“Done with you, Jim,” said Lord Sanquhar, passing suavely over Lady Anne’s interruption.

“Why, then,” said Devlin, “there you both sit with your hands before you, and the dice-box at rest. ’Tis as plain as a pike-staff: you’re quits.”

The man at the window detached himself from the wall, came unobtrusively up to the

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table and stood behind Lady Anne. Lord Sanquhar pulled a piece of gold from his breeches pocket and slapped it down before Sir James.

“An easy win, man”—his nostrils quivered. “Her Ladyship and I are quits, as you say—for the present.”

The colour faded on Nan’s cheek, and then flamed once more. She pushed her chair back.

“It is not so!” she cried in a high trembling voice. “My Lord Sanquhar, Sir James, I take it ill that you should make me the subject of your bets; but since it is so, *mon Dieu!* let’s have the truth. We are *not* quits. I owe Lord Sanquhar a thousand pounds.”

Her words had rung louder than she reckoned. Lady Buckinghamshire, who was taking a stroll round her premises with a wary eye on the different tables—scandal whispered that she had a creature in her pay at nearly every one of them and impounded much of the winnings every night—was attracted by the sound, and directed her steps towards the group. She was lean-

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ing on the arm of a small foppish youth, who seemed somewhat overpowered by the honour.

“Who has lost a thousand pounds?” cried she, with mock horror in her own strident tones. “Fie, that I cannot entertain my friends to a little moderate amusement but that such high stakes should be sent flying.”

“No one has lost a thousand pounds,” said Lord Sanquhar, smiling. “And there lies my golden word that my fair adversary and I are even.”

“What, that chit?” said Lady Buckinghamshire, measuring, not unkindly, Nan’s lovely youth. “Nay, never look so distressed, child! Why, if you had lost *ten* thousand, you need have no anxiety about payment—not for some twenty years to come, with that face. Eh, my Lord Damory?”

Lady Anne rose from her chair and looked quickly at her hostess’s raddled countenance. An idiotic laugh from Lord Damory, a look of well-assumed vagueness upon Sir James Devlin’s smooth, spare

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features, the indescribable flicker upon Sanquhar's as he dropped his eyelids — each man in his way had somehow pointed the observation so that it went cruelly home to her pride. A fierceness rose in her.

“Nay, Madam,” she said, with deliberate enunciation, “I fail to comprehend you. Need a woman have your countenance and your years to be honest enough to wish to pay her debts?”

A light of enjoyment and admiration leaped into Devlin's glance. His neighbour turned away, seized with a fit of coughing. The man that stood behind Nan made a slight movement forward, then restrained himself. Lord Sanquhar still sat with drooping lids. Lord Kilcrouney, from the table near them, suddenly exploded into his hands. But Lady Buckinghamshire's retort, delayed by a second's blank astonishment, promptly drowned all other sounds.

“Who is the honest young lady, may I ask? Upon rep, my fair Madam, you do well to study with my Lord Sanquhar if you would retain those virtues which so well become you! You do indeed, la! Here,

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then, is a beauty who is anxious to pay her debts! Why, and I trust so, Madam" —from high sarcasm, Lady Buckinghamshire now abruptly fell into rough bullying—"else would you be no guest for this house. I shall have no fine ladies here who think they can play for ruinous stakes, then act the pretty cheat. Come, my proud Madam, you owe Lord Sanquhar a thousand pounds! You'll pay Lord Sanquhar a thousand pounds, if you please. You'll give him your note for the amount this moment, aye, before you leave the table."

Nan swayed a little as she stood in her young dignity, and put out her hands vaguely. Into what trap had she rushed in her folly? How could she do as this horrible old woman bade her? How could she sign away a thousand pounds straight off, when she had not a penny beyond that three hundred in the bank that she could honestly call her own?

There was a stir among the men. Sanquhar started from his seat. At the same instant Devlin, Lord Damory, and the man behind Nan's chair, took a simultaneous

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step forward which brought them close to each other.

“Lady Buckinghamshire, you are speaking to my cousin, Lady Anne Day,” said Lord Damory, in feeble, shocked tones, his round eyes starting from his head.

“Buck,” said Jim Devlin, his cool, mocking air striking like a spray upon the stout lady’s gross heat, “go and play your own little game, there’s a good soul, and don’t ever meddle in other people’s, else you’ll drive us to Archer’s or Goosetree’s.”

“And when I assure Lady Buckinghamshire,” said Lord Sanquhar, with great deliberation, “that Lady Anne owes me nothing, that ’t was a mere error of calculation — and that’s the easiest thing in the world, as our gentle hostess herself knows — her natural anxiety for the honour of her house will, I trust, be instantly allayed.”

Nan stood looking from one to the other, half poised for flight, half ready to turn at bay with the last desperate courage of the weakling. She was hesitating once more on the edge of that precipice, Sanquhar’s protection. But the man behind her

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pushed by them and stood beside her, so that her retreat was barred.

All stared at him. None of Lady Buckinghamshire's *habitués* had acquaintance with the owner of that handsome stern face. But Nan gave a faint cry and caught at the amber curtain behind her to save herself from falling. Lady Buckinghamshire, feeling perhaps that she scarcely cut a graceful figure, here promptly and discreetly vanished.

The stranger whom only Nan knew turned and spoke quickly in her ear: "Compose yourself; there's been scandal enough!"

Then he advanced upon the others. "Gentlemen, the matter is quickly settled. My Lord Sanquhar—such is your name, I believe—your statement is incorrect. The Lady Anne Day owes you at this moment one thousand pounds, for which sum I will instantly write you a note, which Messrs. Drummond will duly honour on sight."

The eyes of the two men met.

"Pray," said Lord Sanquhar, drawing a long breath through those flickering nostrils of his, while his lips yet wore a sweet smile;

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“pray, Sir, whom might I have the honour? I am not surprised that you should wish to assume a privilege which I intend to keep for myself, but—’tis perhaps a mere prejudice—among gentlemen there are such trifles as introductions. Even here”—he cast his insolent eye about him and brought it back to the attack—“even here we keep to these small decencies of life.”

“My Lord,” said the stranger, drawing his tablets from his pocket and sitting down at the table with an unconcern that was more contemptuous than any words, “if you will kindly look at the signature upon this paper you will see that I need no introduction to you to pay my wife’s debts.”

Had Philip Day been a vain man, he might well have been elated at the sensation now produced. Lord Sanquhar’s face became convulsed with a passion, instantly repressed, but which left him livid as it passed and betrayed how fully his sudden adversary had scored. There were murmurs and glances of admiration among the group of onlookers.

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Any Englishman, however degenerate, however vapid or dissolute, will yet keep a spark in him that kindles for the husband defending his wife's honour. Had the Squire to-night hung, as once, on Anne's least glance, he would have thrilled to the fire that her blue eyes shot at him through the rising tears. But the master of Queen's Compton had no pride in this evening's work. None, *certainly*—only a deep shame that his Nan should have made her name so light a thing as to be bandied between these idle gamblers. He wrote in silence and unmoved gravity; and then, getting up, handed the tablet with a slight inclination of the head to Lord Sanquhar.

“The honour of an introduction to Lord Sanquhar,” he said in level tones, as though continuing his former speech, “is one that I do not covet.”

Lord Sanquhar bowed very low; and, though he smiled, his face was still deathly white. “But I shall have the honour,” he retorted, taking the paper and folding it as he spoke, “of sending you a due acknowledgment of the receipt of your favour,

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Mr.—” He opened the paper, sought the name with supercilious eyebrow raised, then his eye quickened. “Ah!” he went on in altered tones, “I see you have put down the address. Your servant, Mr. Day.” He slipped the paper into his breast and made another bow, less profound but infinitely more courteous.

“It is always well,” answered Philip Day steadily, “to mark the address in a transaction of this kind. It precludes all possible misunderstanding.” Sanquhar fell back with a gesture of acknowledgment; and, without one further glance at Lady Anne, he walked away.

The Squire approached his wife and offered her his arm:

“Your coach awaits? That is well; I will conduct you to it.”

He led her across the room towards Lady Buckinghamshire, who watched them come, half nervous, half defiant.

“Madam,” he said, “my wife and I are infinitely obliged to you for your entertainment.”

Trembling on his arm, Lady Anne, with

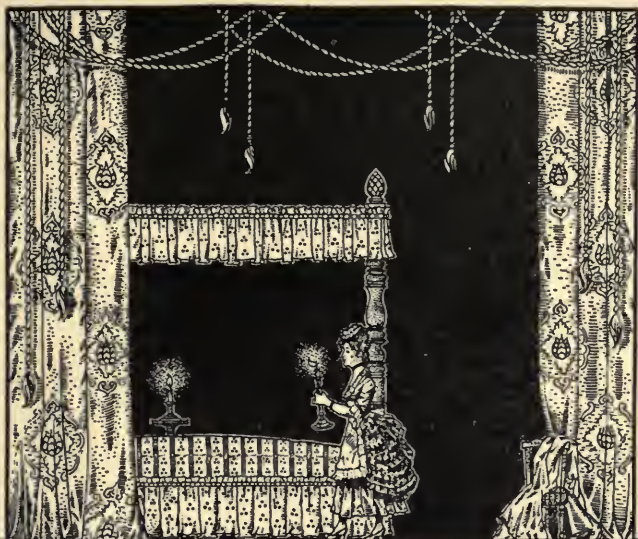
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lids cast down, swept a curtsey. A little silence, and many eyes followed their exit.

“By the powers,” said the Viscount Kilcrouney, lying back in his chair with his thumbs in his waistcoat-pockets, “but our little Lady Anne has got a pretty beau at last. Where did she pick up such a stag? He’s not grown in Buck’s kennels, I warrant.”

“Tush, man,” said his neighbour, Jim Devlin, “a beau? why, ’t is the lady’s own husband. Lord, such a connubial play as we’ve seen!”

“Nan’s husband,” echoed honest Kilcrouney, and drew his fingers out of his pockets to thump the table in his amazement. “Then of all the little linnet-headed little geese!”



CHAPTER
VIII

CHAPTER VIII

NO sooner did she find herself safe in the coach with her husband than Lady Anne collapsed into a corner and burst into tears—tears, no doubt, less of remorse than of relief and joy.



But the quality of her emotion soon changed. She, who had not doubted that she would forthwith find herself gathered into his

arms and have the happy luxury of sobbing her repentance on his breast, was met by a silence, an immobility that struck a chill to her heart. It seemed almost as if that presence by her side gave out cold. Her tears

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froze upon her cheeks; the sobs were strangled in her throat; she felt paralysed. The more ardently she desired reconciliation and the restoration of his love at any price, the more utterly incapable she found herself of making an advance.

Perhaps, could she have known what strong tension the man was putting upon himself to keep those arms of his folded from the touch of her, even in anger; to keep those lips sternly silent, even from reproach, she might still have found that simple phrase of love, regret and submission which would have brought from his manly heart the most instant, the most complete forgiveness. But this impassiveness, this silence that chilled, ended at last by hardening her. There is no tide so bitter to a woman's heart as passion driven back upon itself. A man may be rebuffed, may have his advances rejected, and yet suffer no loss of dignity, even in his own eyes. But the woman conscious in her heart of an unreciprocated ardour; the woman, the wife, who calls to her own and is unanswered — there is no humiliation deeper than hers, no more

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maddening spur to retaliation. Alas for poor Nan! She had found it too easy hitherto to flout him and then recall him. She had turned the facile weapon of her tears too often upon him: and tears that no longer touch have the art of singularly irritating. Now, for the sake of his own manhood, for the sake of their future peace, seeing therein the sole chance of happiness with her, he had resolved that nothing short of the most complete surrender on her part would induce him to take her again to his enfolding love. Perverse child, she must be taught her lesson! He had dreamed to teach her with a kiss, and she had chosen the rod. So be it — till the scholar was perfect! True — and he knew it — he was playing a mighty dangerous game. But the stake was high; and, taking all in all, he had confidence in his wife's innermost rectitude of soul. Even now, amid the sullen thunders of his indignation, the cry of her honest young voice loudly acknowledging the debt echoed gratefully in his memory: his Nan had her pure heart still. And, besides, was he not — unknown to her — keeping watch and ward?

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When he stood on the steps, between Lady Kilcrouney's link-extinguishers, to hand her out of the coach with the elaborate Frenchified ceremony that seemed assumed in sheer irony of her taste, she could have struck his hand aside with the temper of a child. It was all she could do to keep her head high and respond with due haughtiness to his hateful "Good-night to you, my Lady; or, rather, good-morning!" as he bowed her into the hall.

On the first bend of the stairs she paused and looked back. He was still standing, as if waiting. Her heart gave a great leap. She turned round. He read her thought, and spoke. And, oh! how she blessed her little angry gods a minute later, in the kind darkness of her room, that, before she had betrayed her joy or descended a step, he had spoken first. Said he:

"I should like a few words with my Lord Kilcrouney — on a pure matter of business," he added, with a smile so cruel, she thought, that she could hardly draw her breath as she hurried, shaken now out of all dignity, from his sight.

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Philip Day's face was very thoughtful as he followed the servant into the library, where, between strictly undisturbed shelves, Lord Kilcronev had his broiled bones (and their usual liquid accompaniments) towards the small hours of most mornings.

Lady Kilcronev bounced into her friend's room without knocking, ruthless of disturbance to slumber. That it should be in darkness seemed but to increase the hostess's ire. She called shrilly upon Lydia for a light; and, closing the door, marched to the bed upon very determined high heels.

In truth, the memory of certain words that had passed between herself and her lord, as they returned from "Lady Buck's," was rankling in Kitty's mind to such an extent that she could not think of sleep before she had had her say on the night's doings.

Kilcronev (in whose eyes hitherto his Kitty, the most perfect of women, could do no wrong) had actually turned upon her with something approaching to rebuke.

"I don't know what game it is you're playing, Kitty, with that guest of ours," had

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he said, "but I'm thinking now you had best have left her in the country."

"And, indeed, Denis," had retorted with wrath the lady (who had already heard various accounts of what James Devlin called "the connubial scene," and was not in the best of humours with her once "sweetest Nan" for creating scandal), "I wish I had. For she is the silliest piece I have ever dealt with, and I've known many fools in my day."

"She's got a fine fellow of a husband," had remarked Kilcrouney, "and the mischief's in it; I am sorry for the man." And he would have added, "Send her home," in that tone of authority so rarely used that it was all-paramount in its effect, but that his Irish notions of hospitality could not let him contemplate such a step towards a guest. He had therefore gone on merely with the remark:

"If the little thing's a fool, the more reason for you, who are none" — here he had pinched her ear good-naturedly, but his tone was none the less disapproving — "not to be leading her into all this nonsense.

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She's too monstrous pretty," he added reflectively.

To be found fault with by the adoring Denis was an unheard-of situation in itself; but this last remark had been intolerable. Nevertheless Kilcroneys's Viscountess was far too shrewd (unlike silly Nan) to wreak vengeance where it would only recoil upon herself. Reserving her forces, prudently, for the other delinquent, she had been softer than silk to her lord all the rest of the drive; but her energies were none the less potent for being pent up till the proper moment.

It is not of the least use to pretend sleep when you are lying, in your finery, on the outside of the bed, and your pillow is all wet with tears. It is also exceedingly difficult to present either an airy or a dignified front when thus discovered. And the gentlest woman would be prone to tartness in such disadvantageous circumstances.

"Pray, Lady Kilcroneys—" began Lady Anne, in no amiable tones, as she sat up in the four-poster and jerked her face pettishly aside from the light.

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“And pray, you foolish thing,” retorted Kitty, with a highly virtuous air, “I am sure I’m not surprised to see you cry. A pretty mess you have made of things this night! Good God! woman,” went on Lady Kilcrouney, putting down the candlestick with a slap, “how shall I look Lady Ongar in the face again? Do you really know so little of the world that you must choose the rooms of the most disreputable woman in London for your *éclat* — and insult her, into the bargain, that she may not leave you as much character even as herself?”

“*Mais*, if it comes to that,” answered the other, striving in vain to keep the sound of tears from her voice, and still looking steadily away, “if it comes to that, Lady Kilcrouney, the question may well be — how comes it that you should bring one who is your guest into the company of the most disreputable woman in London?”

“I — bring you?” cried Kitty, clapping her soft palms together. “Now, Heaven grant me patience! I, bring you, child? Did I not do all that a hostess in civility can do to keep you at home? Did I not tell

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you there was gaming? Did I not hint to you that you would do well to visit your mother? Did I not — only this very evening — bid you (if you would take my advice) to bed early, to get back your country roses, which are fast withering, my dear? Short of telling you plain I'd as lief not have your company, Madam, pray, how would you have had me act?"

There was a stricken silence from the young culprit on the bed. This was all so literally true that, in sooth, even her active tongue had no answer ready. Presently, however, a retort suggested itself.

"I marvel, Lady Kilcrone, that a lady *de votre condition* should herself frequent such a house! How could I, your guest —"

"Oh, you marvel, Madam, do you?" Kitty took a couple of steps nearer the bed. "Well, 't is but natural, I suppose, you should marvel. I go there, Lady Anne, for a reason you, indeed, would be little like to understand. I go there — that my husband may not go alone."

"As you say," flashed back Lady Anne, turning full now upon her adversary, "hav-

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ing myself a husband, my Lady Kilcronev, who, *Dieu merci!* can be trusted to look after himself, 't is little like I could have a fellow-feeling for such motives."

"Nay, poor man," quoth Kitty, smiling in a quite intolerable manner, "'t is all the other way in your *ménage*, my love. And, indeed, 't is a vast deal of looking after you require, as the worthy gentleman your husband has found out to-night to his cost. I believe you would have been at a pretty pass, indeed, had he not stepped to your rescue. I am given to understand that your cantrips have cost him nothing short of a thousand pounds, besides the scandal of the business. I fear he will end by finding you an — an expensive luxury, my sweet child!"

She waited a second, her eyes sparkling, her wicked, witty mouth curled upon a scornful smile. This time Nan had positively nothing to say. After a triumphant pause :

"I wish you a pleasant rest," cried Lady Kilcronev in delicate derision, made a very rustling curtsey, took up her candlestick, and retired.



CHAPTER
IX

CHAPTER IX



HE fair skirmishers met again at that late breakfast over which the whilom lazy Kitty had (since her marriage) made it a rule always to preside. Gone were the days when she supped her creamy chocolate and nibbled her biscuits in the shadow of rosy bed-curtains; when she vowed that the world was not mellow enough for her countenance before noon!

Kilcrouney had asserted that he could not swallow a mouthful; that every bit he took, by the powers, had no taste in it unless his little darling sat opposite to him. And the lady was wise in the ways of men. She knew that if a fond husband (who

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is at the same time decidedly a gregarious soul) be left solitary by his wife, he must inevitably seek other company in the end.

Lady Anne was elaborately civil to her hostess this morning. Lady Kilcrouney, on her side, was kind and gentle: nay, almost tender in her manner.

But the genial presence of Kilcrouney himself was missing at the meal, and his wife made no reference to the fact. On the whole it was a dismal repast. Kitty crumbled her bread, glanced at the clock, started at the least sound, and now and again cast looks of compassion, almost of sorrow, at her companion. The latter, with no more pronounced appetite, was infinitely more composed. One would have thought that, in the over-night events, it was Kitty who had been the sinner and Nan the creature of superior virtue, wisdom, and disapproval.

Suddenly Lady Kilcrouney sprang to her feet; her face went pale. Nan stared at her in amazement. The next instant Lord Kilcrouney entered the room. The eyes of husband and wife met — hers full of anxious inquiry — and the man gave a little nod.

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He looked vastly tired (vastly dissipated, thought Lady Anne severely), with heavy eyes that evidently had not closed all night, and deep lines of fatigue round his handsome mouth; but vastly good-humoured for all that.

The Squire's wife went on primly breaking tiny pieces off her bread-roll, and occasionally popping one between her lips. She might be all that was remiss in a wife (as Kitty had given her to understand), but, upon her soul, she had more spirit in her than to permit *her* husband to walk in from the street to breakfast after so evidently making a night of it. If that was not the self-same lavender coat and the blush-pink waistcoat he had sported at the gambling-rooms, then had Nan no eye for colour.

All at once she became aware that an extraordinary agitation had taken possession of Kitty—the little Viscountess seemed to hesitate between smiles and tears.

“Kitty, me darling,” said Lord Kilcronev with elaborate carelessness, “what have you got for me? Nay, I've no stomach for that hot-water stuff this morning. I could do

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with a round of beef and a tankard. You'll be hearing news presently," he turned pointedly to Nan. "My Lord Sanquhar, I grieve to say, has been seized with an inflammation of the lung. You will read of it in the *Gazette* to-morrow."

"*Eh, Mon Dieu!* 't is a sudden illness," said Nan, her heart beginning to beat so quickly that she spoke with difficulty.

"Mighty sudden," said her host, with something of a wink.

"But no one else is ill, I trust?" put in Kitty quickly.

"Devil a bit," answered Kilcrouney, with much cheerfulness. "Every one the better, I should say."

The tears and smiles which had been struggling for possession of Lady Kilcrouney's charming *minois* now amicably settled the affair between them and appeared together. When Kitty smiled she was bewitching, and when she wept she was adorable; when she smiled and wept at once she was altogether distracting. She ran across the room and, to Nan's great amazement, caught her round the neck:

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“My dear, my dear—” she said, and gave a little sob. “Kilcronev, we can tell her now.”

“About this same lung of Sanquhar’s?” said Kilcronev. “’T is not astonishing it should ache him, considering how your good husband has let the air of the morning in upon it. Raw air it was, begorrah!”

“My husband?” said Nan haughtily.

“Oh! you understand very well,” said Kitty, giving her a shake. “And think what it would have been, Nan, if he had been hurt instead, and you at variance with him—and all for your fault!”

She looked across at her own lord, her dark eyes misted with the unwonted softness of her shaken mood. She wore that morning pale primrose ribbons to her muslin wrapper, and a little lace cap was poised on the top of her dark curls, just clouded with powder. Denis gazed at her, enraptured. He took two great steps towards her, and she a fluttering trip towards him. Then Lady Anne, holding her head stiff with an air of great decorum, heard the sound of his fond kiss. Her own miserable heart swelled. She was palpitating, too, to know the story.

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Indeed, from the first mention of Lord Sanquhar's name, in a flash she had realised something of what must have taken place. But certain situations demand a very special dignity, and no situation more than that of being thoroughly in the wrong.

"'Pon my soul," said his Lordship, sinking down into his chair and looking already prodigious refreshed, although the tankard and cold beef were as yet untouched, "'t was the neatest thing I ever saw in me life. That husband of yours, Lady Nan, is the boy for my money." He took up the carving-knife to help himself, but paused, in a smiling reminiscence, balancing it in his hand. "Bejabers!" he laughed. "There stood Sanquhar — as tight a fellow as you could see — on guard, the cock of Angelo's, and ready, by thunder! to make a pretty widow this morning, with all the rules of one-two-pink; and there stood my man — meaning yours, your Ladyship — who knows no more of French *ça-ça* games than an English bulldog. But he knew what he wanted. Ladies, I'm glad you did not see his face: 't would have spoilt the ele-

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gance of your dreams for a week! He knew what he wanted, and, by the Lord, he took it! Just a step and a thrust, his own great chest as uncovered as be-damned. It gave me a twist down the back, I can tell you, to have to stand and watch his recklessness."

The speaker made a neat fencing pass at the round of beef with strong and nimble wrist, and left the carving-knife sticking in the joint. Lady Anne gave a faint cry and covered her face with her hands. But Kitty clapped her palms together and crowed triumph with soft and cruel joy. "'T was the quickest meeting I ever went to," concluded Denis with satisfaction.

He drew his weapon out of the beef and began to slice with great gusto. Then presently he resumed:

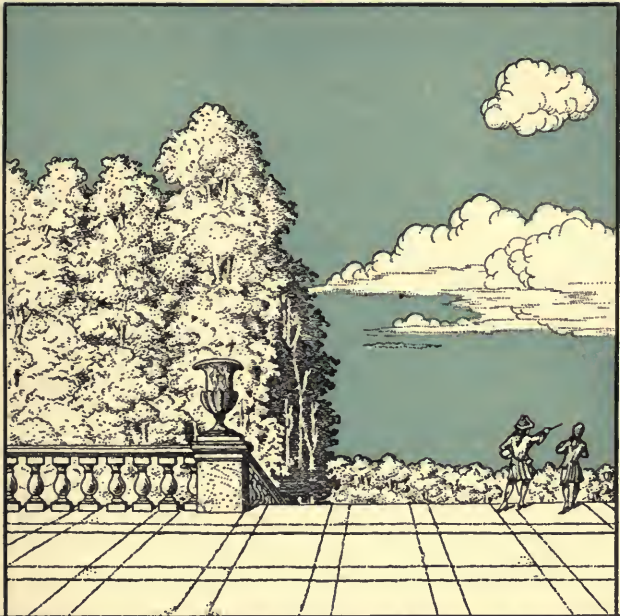
"My Lord Sanquhar was the one who was puzzled! By George, he was so much taken aback that he had n't time to be astonished. He drops me his sword, he claps me his hand over his side, and stares. And then he goes as red as the blood that's creeping out between his fingers; and then

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as white as the shirt against it. He staggers and then gets a hold of his ground again, and he stares at my man, and my man stares him back. And, by the Lord, we were as quiet as mice about them — as if the fight were still going on. Then Sanquhar's face begins to work. I think it was trying to smile he was, but he looked like a devil. And he fumbles with his right hand in his breeches pocket and draws out a bit of paper. And he begins to tear at it between his right hand and his teeth, still clapping his side with the left. 'Mr. Day,' he calls, 'Mr. Day! I'd have taken your wife, but I'll be d—d if I take your money!' And, with that, he crumples up in a heap on the ground."

Lady Anne rose to her feet with a single spring. Her blue eyes blazed from out her pale face on her good-natured host.

"How dare you!" she said. "How dare you, Sir, repeat this insult to me?" She rushed for the door with a great scolding of silks. "I hope Lord Sanquhar will die!" she cried from the threshold, with desperate intensity.



CHAPTER
X

CHAPTER X

LADY FLORA DARESTAMER was at home to her friends at Elm Park House on the evening of the fifth of June. She requested their presence *in maschera*. Lady Kilcrouney tossed her head on receiving the handsome card, engraved in charming style by Mr. Cipriani.



“I see myself in that rabble!” quoth she.

Now this was scarcely fair on Lady Flo, who, good-natured as she was, knew very well how to keep her celebrated parties vastly select. But she was none of Kitty Kilcrouney’s friends, and Kitty Kilcrouney had no pleasant souvenir of Elm Park House.

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Moreover, the little lady had begun to find that Nan's pie was considerably too hot for her pretty fingers. She had had, after the Sanquhar duel, a stormy visit from my Lady Ongar, who had hitherto kept prudently aloof from the house which sheltered her rebellious daughter.

The fat Countess had displayed a deal of vivacity in the encounter. Between indignant interjections of French *Mon Dieus* and English "Hoity-toities," the irate mother had contrived to make some very shrewish digs at the Viscountess's own past — a past which, if vivacious, was nevertheless a record of such virtue that Kitty was proportionately furious at her visitor's innuendoes. There had been, therefore, a very pretty passage of arms between the two dames; but upon Lady Kilcrone's triumphant curtseying forth of her antagonist, it was only the proper sense of what was due to herself that made her resolve, in righteous defiance, to keep Lady Anne for the rest of the season. For, truth to tell, she was already so heartily sick of her position as chaperon that, had it not been for the mother's ill-advised step, it is

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probable that Kitty would have traversed her lord's hospitable commands, and, after some manner only known to feminine ingenuity, very soon have driven Lady Nan elsewhere.

Thus the Kilcrouney mansion could not be said to be now a very harmonious abode. But Nan was more determined than ever to remain, in spite of her hostess's perceptibly sour-sweet demeanour. Pride for pride, she had rather bide, an unwelcome guest, than return home, an unwelcome wife. Another small diplomatic movement that she had made towards her husband had met with the same torturing result — utmost generosity of hand combined with utmost unresponsiveness of heart.

It was but a short letter that she had sent him — upon a mere matter of business: one of the greys having fallen lame; but surely, surely, he might have read between the lines!

“I am so sorry” — so it ran — “I hope you won't be angry. Town life is very trying; but I can quite well do with two horses. And if it gets rest at deare Queen's Compton, it must soon recover.” She further

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hoped that Philip was very well and that Philip's mother was very well. She sent her love. She remained his dutiful wife. P.S. — Town was very hot.

To this letter she had received no reply, unless the prompt substitution of another horse for the lame one could be regarded as such.

Nan was very angry, with the deep anger of the heart. She had not known in her girlhood that one's poor body could be so torn with ugly passion. So be it! Now she would show him complete indifference. Now he must suffer as he had made her suffer. Now was Lady Anne Day to prove herself the most gay, the most sought after, the most famous beauty and breaker of hearts in all London Town.

And therefore was she mightily displeased at Lady Kilcrouney's decision to refuse the Elm Park House invitation; for Lady Flora's masques, always graced by royalty, were beyond compare the best of the season's routs.

She turned her own card over and over between her fingers. Emancipated though

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she was, she could hardly make up her mind to go alone ; on the other hand, Lady Ongar had so successfully worked among her friends that Nan dared not beg another matron's companionship.

" 'T will seem vastly strange that you should absent yourself, surely," she ventured, at first with some timidity.

"Nay, my love," returned Kitty sweetly. "This is doubtless an evil world, but there are a few women of heart and conduct left. No one will wonder at a wife who likes to spend an evening at home now and again with her husband. You have such French notions, my dearest dear !"

Woman of the world as she strove to be, Nan could never keep the tell-tale blood from rushing to her face ; but she was learning fast to whet the sharpness of her own tongue against Lady Kilcroneys's.

"Nay, a thousand pardons, Kitty," she cried, opening her eyes with that expression of candour which most exasperated her hostess. "I should have remembered you have indeed most excellent reasons for keeping away from Lady Flo's."

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“How now, chit?” cried Kitty hotly.

“’T would be, *peut-être*, a most unpleasant encounter.”

“The child is raving!”

“My Lord Mandeville is safe to be there with his beautiful Countess. People would be watching you, *ma pauvre amie*. ’T would be hard, indeed, to wear a fitting countenance.”

“Your ignorance, my angel, is the only thing that excuses your absurdity. Pray be assured that I shall ever meet my Lord Mandeville with calm pulses. I hear the creature’s grown fat—but I still take an interest in his wife.”

“Oh, *sans doute*,” commented Anne, with an acid giggle.

“Faith, Nan,” said Kitty, gazing at her with disapproval, “I’ve made a mistake. Town is no school for you. Your head is not strong enough to bear it. And your poor husband was in the right of it. Pray do not bring your bits of slanderous gossip into my house. People in our position will be lied about, no doubt, but people of our breeding pay no heed to such low scandals.”

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“If you refer,” said Lady Anne calmly, “to the fact that my Lord Mandeville had the bad taste to prefer *une fille de théâtre* to yourself, although you would, perhaps, not have said him nay, I beg to state, my Lady Kilcrouney, that I have it on most respectable authority.”

“Respectable authority!” echoed Kitty, very angry indeed. “Why, ’t is the vilest falsehood! I wonder at you that you have the face to repeat it. And who, Madam, pray, told you that fine tale?”

“’T was yourself, dear Kitty,” cooed my Lady Anne.

“I?” cried Lady Kilcrouney. Her eyes flashed. Then—for she had a sense of humour—she broke into rippling laughter. “Did I? Was it possible that I once thought so well of you as to make you my confidante? Why, then, you’re sadly changed for the worse, Nan, and I’ll not bring you to Elm Park to make a fool of yourself in a mask. Look you for another escort, or go alone, if you’ll not take my advice and stay at home quietly.”

Though she walked out of the room

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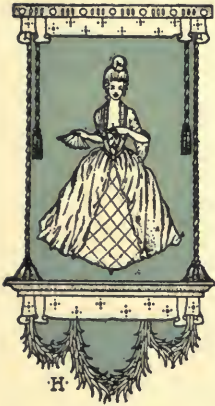
laughing, my Lady Kilcronney loved the Lady Anne Day none the dearer for this conversation. And Lady Anne Day, though she fell to sad brooding the instant her friend's back was turned, was none the less resolved upon Elm Park House.



CHAPTER
XI

CHAPTER XI

MELANCHOLY in solitude can be almost a pleasing sensation ; but melancholy in the midst of a gay crowd is intolerable. The masque at Elm Park House was as flat, stale, and unprofitable an evening as French Nan had yet spent since she had left the Rue St. Honoré.



The fruit of her own way was indeed bitter to-night between her teeth. For escort during the long lonely drive she had at last, in sheer desperation, fixed upon her cousin Damory. That youth was, *certainly*, no interesting personality ; but at any rate, tongues could not wag too freely over her choice, nor evil minds impute to her any desire for dangerous company. His vacuity, however, did not tend to make

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her forget her private troubles. Without even the spice of risk to make her pulses beat the faster, her escapade to-night became the veriest boredom.

She could hardly keep her mouth, under the hanging lace of the mask, from unmeasured yawning. Around her a hundred couples flirted and whispered. One could almost hear the rustle of volatile Cupid's wings, the hiss of his tiny arrows, the little cries that heralded the straightness of his aim.

Some gentlemen were masked, others not; but the ladies, without exception, wore their visards. How Lady Kilcrouney would have revelled in such an opportunity! Nan had been thought by a French Court to have a pretty wit of her own. But not one *piquante* sally did she feel spirit enough to shoot at the most provoking beau of the night from her coign of vantage; not a gleam of the eye did she find the strength to send sparkling, though none could have identified the sender.

She sat, she walked, she danced like an automaton; Cousin Damory, her uninspir-

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ing shadow, his vapid comment ever in her ear:

“ Why, Cousin Nan! Look at that fellow! Did you see that pair, Cousin Nan? I vow that ’s Sukey; she ’s been following my Lord Verney the whole evening! See, he ’s got up again and gone away! D’ye think she ’ll run him down, Cousin Nan? He, he! I would n’t like to have Sukey after me. She ’s a prodigious persevering girl, is Sukey — he, he! Cousin Nan, what a little ear you have got; ’t is just like a little pink shell, Cousin Nan!”

A hundred times Nan pettishly protested that she would endure no more of this insufferable tedium, but must have her coach instantly. Yet each time she lingered. It seemed a final humiliation to depart thus without even the poor reward of her audacity.

In truth, Nan was but a little coward at heart. It was the first time she had ventured into company without Kitty Kilcrone’s airy protection. She did not drive Damory from her elbow — dull dog as he was — for to find herself alone among this daring crowd would have meant giddy terror.

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“Fie, little mask,” said a man’s voice in her ear; “where were you brought up that you do not know the golden motto: ‘Waste not, want not’!”

Nan wheeled round. A pair of pale-blue eyes were fixing her with singular and unpleasant steadiness through a black visard, so close to her that she started back. Then, rallying, with a feeble effort at coquetry: “Need speech be masked as well as face to-night?” she asked.

“Oh! little mask,” answered the other, sinking into the chair behind her and leaning over to whisper into her ear, “words are like faces, and we put masks upon them to tempt others to look for the beauty beneath. Waste not your sweetness, for if you husband not good fortune to-night, you may want to-morrow.”

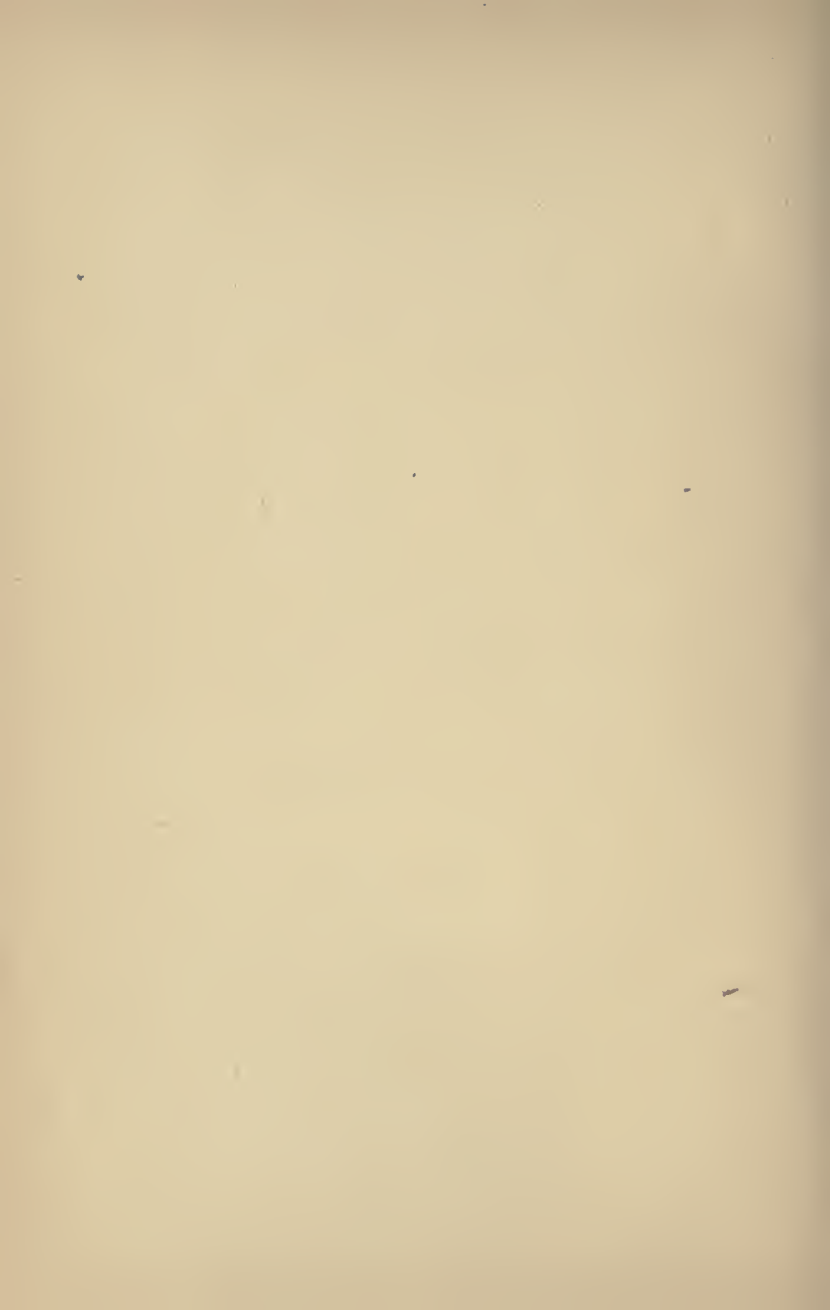
“Husband good fortune?” she queried vaguely, edging away from the gaze and the whisper, that troubled her, she knew not why.

“And what’s he saying, Cousin Nan?” inquired Damory, with a pull at her sleeve.

Truly masques were an intolerable pleasure!



"OH! LITTLE MASK"—Page 154



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“Husband,” repeated he of the pale, fixed eyes, leaning forward as she withdrew. “Nay,” came the whisper in her ear, “what a word! Let no one ever speak of husbands — the name shall be obliterated. Let it be lover in our book!”

Nan turned her little chin sharply away and made as if she heard not. On went the soft, evil whisper:

“Have you met with no such word in your dictionary, sweet one? Shall we then not turn the leaves and look for it together? Oh, it is such a pretty page! It begins with Love, Loveable, and goes on softly: Lovelorn, Lovely — Lover, Loving.”

The whisper became so insidious, the presence across her chair so pressingly close, that Nan rose in a flutter and sharply commanded Lord Damory to order their coach without an instant’s delay.

But now she reckoned without her host, for Damory would not leave without supping. No — not for a thousand Nans! And here was once again sad proof of the inconveniency of mere cousins as cavaliers.

To the supper-room had Nan to go. In

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the supper-room she had to sit, while Damory ate and drank in maddening deliberation — if, indeed, such a word could be applied to the rapidity with which he absorbed glass after glass of Lady Flo's celebrated Sillery.

To her terror the mask with the blue eyes followed her; in spite of her determinedly hunched shoulder and an icy assumption of deafness the whisper still kept dropping words that alternately drove the angry blood to her cheek or drained the colour even from her lips with an unreasoning sense of danger.

At last Damory was dragged to the hall — an even more garrulous and cheerful Damory than before. And Nan stood, tapping her little foot on the step of the granite porch, impatiently waiting the coming up of the greys, gathering courage at the moment of escape, though the insolent blue-eyed whisperer stood but a pace behind her.

“ Will you not let Cousin Damory go back to the capons, sweetheart, and give me his seat? Cousin Damory will but send you to sleep on the way — and, by all the little gods, this night never was made for sleep!”

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“What if I prefer to sleep in a coach?” cried the emboldened Nan.

“Ah, then, again, sweet mask, would you do well to take me! I will give you a pretty dream—Lord, what a dull dream will you have if you trust to Cousin Damory!”

“How, Sir?” said Damory, wheeling round at the sound of his name. The Sillery was scintillating in his usually placid brain.

The greys drew up—all silver in the moonlight, champing and stamping. ’T was a noble team, an equipage for a queen.

“Choose—choose quickly!” bade Nan’s tormentor. “Little lady, if you take *me*, we shall drive into fairyland!”

“My destination is Mayfair,” cried Nan tartly, as she ran down the steps.

“With me you would reach Mayfair in due safety, my dream-princess, but, as I say, by way of fairyland. ’T is ever, alas! the shortest road.”

“But I prefer the safest,” retorted Nan with an angry laugh, thrusting her head out of the window. “Come along, Cousin Damory!”

The blue-eyed mask burst into a laugh;

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and the laugh was taken up in titters by one or two curious spectators as Damory clambered in.

“Oh, ay!” cried the rejected escort, no whit discomfited, it seemed. “Ay,” he cried loudly and derisively, “if ’t is safety is your aim, pretty Nan, you ’ve chosen prodigious wise to-night! You will tell me some day how it likes your Ladyship after a fair trial!”

“Drive on!” shouted Damory furiously; and the greys sprang forward clattering.

“By your leave, Sir,” said a stern voice behind him. A tall masked man pushed somewhat roughly by him, ran down the steps, and swung himself on a sturdy bay horse, which had been led up in the wake of the coach by a servant in plain livery.

“I shall know the cut of those shoulders again,” said Jim Devlin, as he stood looking after the departing guests, ruminating. He doffed his mask and strolled back to the revels.



CHAPTER
XII

CHAPTER XII

C OUSIN DAMORY,

valiant with the spark of Sillery, was in high condition of mingled fury and enterprise. Safe, quotha!—safe, indeed! He would soon show them! The meaner the masculine intellect, the more enraging such a suggestion. But, indeed, even the most gifted youth would hardly regard a beautiful woman's



unlimited confidence when alone with him as a compliment.

“Jim Devlin is an ass, and —” he began, fury having the upper hand.

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“Was, then, yonder mask Jim Devlin?” commented Nan, a small, cold shiver upon her, she scarce knew why. “’Tis the devil himself” had said Kitty. What strain of unsuspected wickedness must be in her, that she, Nan, should yet feel a sort of fascination at the back of her fear of this “devil”! She pulled off her mask, for she felt half stifled with her own blushes.

“’T was prodigious well of you, Cousin Nan, that you should choose me for your escort,” proceeded Lord Damory, enterprise rising. “I feel prodigious flattered at your preference, dear cousin.”

Lady Anne, from her troubling occupations, cast upon him an indifferent glance. What ailed the fool that he should edge so close to her? She pointed her elbow to keep him in his place.

They were whirling along at a fine pace, the greys drumming a rhythm of haste upon the silent night. The waste fields were all gossamer sparkling in the moonlight. The airs which their own speed caught from the still atmosphere fanned Nan’s hot cheek and set her curls dancing, but they could not

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cool Cousin Damory's ardour. Vaguely he felt, besides the stimulus of wine and taunt, that here indeed was an opportunity for your buck — egad, one of positive obligation !

He began to steal a tentative hand round the trim bodice beside him.

“ Oh ! ” — she started.

“ Why, you 're never frightened of me ? ”

“ Of you ? ”

Might he not have read warning upon that contemptuous lip ? But shades of expression are not for the Damorys of this world. His left arm closed round the slender waist ; and, in spite of pointing elbow, it was joined by the right, so that he held her encircled.

“ I vow — in the moonlight, ” he cried, groping after some dimly perceived romance, “ you 're so prodigious pretty, Cousin Nan ! You chose me, did not you ? ” And upon this he kissed all he could reach of her — the back of her round white neck.

Had Nan met these advances either as a jest between kin or with repressive coldness, she might promptly have had the better of Lord Damory. But in her inexperience,

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with cries and angry ejaculations, she fell to fighting like an angry wild thing. And, the situation mounting to his weak brain, even as had the Sillery, Damory was but stimulated. In sooth, he was prodigiously elated. Egad, what a dangerous fellow must he be! Yet, in her encompassing indignation, it was the contemptible personality of her assailant that seemed the unbearable side of the outrage in her eyes.

“Let go of me, you fool! For shame of you, Cousin Damory! My footman shall throw you on the road in a minute, Sir! Hey, John — John!”

But her delicate little pipe was lost in the song of flying iron hoofs and the humming of wheels.

And it is quite possible that Cousin Damory might have succeeded in actually planting a second salute, in spite of the fierce fingers that nipped and slapped, had not the coach been so suddenly drawn up that both occupants were thrown forward with a jerk. When they raised themselves, there was such a scrimmage in the world about them that it was many seconds before

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either of them could grasp the situation. But when, to the shouting of footman and coachman, to the plunging of the horses, to the rough, threatening accents of unknown voices, was added the vision of a loathsome cloth-covered countenance at either window, the horrible circumstances became but too plain—the coach had been stopped by footpads.

What a prize for such birds of prey was the gay coach with the silver steeds, the bejewelled lady!

And where, now, were Cousin Damory's ardours? Where his unwonted exhilaration? Woe was him, why had not that foolish Nan fixed upon another cavalier—why had she insisted on returning before the broad day and its safety?

He thought of the diamond brooch in his scarf, of the diamond buckles on his shoes, of his two watches and the snuff-box with the great emerald that his Grace of Marlborough had given his grandfather. He thought of the gold-hilted sword and its inestimable artistic worth; but, strangely enough, my Lord Damory never once thought of

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using it, though it lay in brave display on the seat before him.

He huddled himself in his cloak and shrank back in his corner as far as possible from a detestable rusty barrel which his own special ruffian had thrust crashing towards him through the glass.

“How, Cousin Damory, have *you* no pistols? *Juste ciel*, where are your pistols?” cried Nan in high, indignant tones.

She sat very upright; and, through the open window, over the head of her new unwelcome visitor, a bright ray of moonlight showed a courageous crimson on either cheek. The footpad drew back to look at her through the holes of his filthy face-cloth, dropping the pistol from its threat.

“Come, pretty bird — with such eyes as those you’ll never need jewels,” said his greasy voice of banter, plentifully interspersed with oaths. “I’d never hurry a lady — but business is business, and our business is of quick bargain, d’ye see. I’ll have them diamonds from your ears, please, my lady —”

“Come, Sir,” said the less accommodating trader on the other side, “out with the

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shiners first, and *presto!* My barker has a trick of going off by itself if it's kept waiting — mark you!”

“Your sword, cousin, your sword!” shrieked Nan, in an ecstasy of exasperation, as she made a futile effort to pull up the window between herself and her assailant; and the ruffian on Damory's side, with a hoarse “Thanking you for the hint, Ma'am,” neatly culled the weapon in question from the cushion.

Here Lord Damory raised a plaintive ob-
jurgation, for the rim of the rusty pistol had touched his cheek.

“Give up your diamonds, for God's sake, Nan, and your necklace too, or we shall both be slaughtered!” he groaned. He was diving for his purse with tremulous haste himself.

“You'd better step out, Sir,” said the man on Nan's side, throwing out the suggestion with a grin. “As for me, I should be loth to spoil a lady's beauty — but those earrings will come quick enough if I pluck them for myself.” So saying, he stretched a grimy hand towards her face.

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At this instant, above the oaths and shouts of the fighting servants outside and the frantic struggles of the horses — even as the ruffian made at Nan's necklace a plunge so greedy that the string broke and a milky shower rained over her brocades — there came a thunder of galloping hoofs, the crack of a pistol, then a shock which shook the coach on its springs. Cousin Damory's particular ruffian suddenly disappeared, hurled as it were away from the window, his head striking against the broken glass and his pistol dropping upon Damory's lap. The pitiful escort seemed almost more alarmed than before this new development; but Nan, quick as thought, picked up the weapon and pointed it at her own momentarily arrested footpad. She pulled the trigger: there was a flash in the pan — nothing more, to her immense disgust; for she had it then in her to kill. But behold! she was also delivered. A blade twice gleamed blue in the moonlight, then howls and curses took the place of oaths and shouts. John footman's honest country voice might now be heard raised in exultation. The horses gave a wild plunge forward, then

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were again arrested. And then commanding accents called :

“ Let the rascals run, Basil. We’ve settled three of them ; ’t will suffice ! ”

Nan popped her head out of the window. There, as clear as day, she beheld two horsemen — one evidently a servant, the other as evidently a gentleman. The man’s face was unknown to her ; the gentleman was masked. She thought of Jim Devlin with a shudder that the highwayman himself had not evoked. But, as the gentleman dismounted, flinging his reins to the servant, she marked all at once that the stalwart figure of their rescuer was very different from the slight proportions of the mask who had tormented her so persistently.

He walked quickly round to the other side of the coach and briskly opened the door with his left hand, kicking the stunned foot-pad aside.

“ Sir,” said he quietly to the cowering Damory, “ you will do me the favour to descend this instant.”

The poor young nobleman now indeed believed that he had fallen from Charybdis

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into Scylla. The falcon had but robbed the kite of its quarry, it was clear; and matters were no better for the quarry; nay, worse! A filthy, truculent thief on foot was bad enough, but the Gentleman of the Road, on horseback, with his deadly elegance, with his beau's silken mask and his gleaming sword, was a still more alarming encounter. Cousin Damory clung to his seat with both hands. It seemed as if the coach walls, as if even Nan's presence were some kind of protection.

"Will you not descend, Sir?" repeated the firmly polite new-comer.

And as the other still sat staring, immobile, teeth chattering, the supposed highwayman, with a laugh, reversed his sword and proceeded to dig him out with the hilt. A fine grip on the collar aided other hints. Lord Damory found himself standing, weak-kneed, on the road, beside the prostrate thief. The unknown, his sword under his arm, was surveying him with eyes that had (thought the agitated peer) a most sinister glow behind the visard.

"In sooth, Sir," said the gentleman at last, in tones that were like the sting of a whip,

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“the lady who has chosen *you* as escort on the road displayed a most prodigious discernment!”

From within the coach came a stifled cry. Anne fell back, covering her face with her hands.

“Is that your sword, Sir?”

Damory jumped, glanced at the gold hilt that shone star-like on the ground where it had fallen from the footpad’s hand, then nodded forlornly. No hope now for the diamond shoe-buckles, the emerald snuff-box, the brooch, the watches!

Slowly then did the masked man sheathe his own sword, and, stooping, pick up Damory’s weapon of great price.

“It has a most elegant hilt,” quoth he, holding it horizontally in both hands, “but fie upon it for a useless blade!”

Whereupon, with fingers of incredible strength, on a sudden movement of anger, he broke the said blade twice across his knee and flung the pieces contemptuously towards their owner; then handed him the hilt with an even greater air of contempt. And before the bewildered fop could gather his

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scattered wits sufficiently to realise what was taking place, the coach door was clapped to.

“Madam,” said the stranger, “you may now proceed. Up with you, John. Drive on, George! Basil, my horse here!”

“Philip!” cried Nan, putting her face to the window, even as the coach began to roll.

But it is the etiquette of masks to deny their identity. And Philip Day answered her not by one word, but mounted and followed the equipage.

Lord Damory raised a dismal howl when it dawned upon him that coach and horseman were deliberately abandoning him on the waste lands of Fulham, in the awful hour before dawn, with three footpads, dead or wounded, for sole company! Clutching his valuable hilt, he set off running after the retreating wheels.

How he presently fell into the hands of the escaped party of the band; how he lost not only snuff-box, watches, and brooches, but also his fine suit of clothes, his silk stockings and garters; and how, thereafter, finding that his very appearance at the clubs and

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about Town excited inextinguishable laughter, he took a trip to the Continent, may be related by any who care to write "The Fop's Progress."

Nan, in her coach, saw with mixed feelings London spring up beside her on each side in the grey dawn. She was longing for the moment when her new escort should dismount at the Kilcroneys' door, and, perforce, listen to her at last; and yet she dreaded that moment. It was perhaps the keenest humiliation of her life that she had suffered this evening. There had at least been the dignity of danger in her choice of Lord Sanguhar as a beau. But to aim secretly at exciting a husband's jealousy and to have selected so pitiable a rival that she became herself an object of derision — could Fortune have provided a more cruel turn of the wheel?

Tears fell one by one, while, mechanically, she began to collect the scattered pearls of her celebrated necklace. Little as she cared for them this moment, they were his pearls, after all!

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She had made a bag of her handkerchief, and it was full of the precious beads when the coach reached Mayfair and clattered down Hertford Street. And so she could not even dry her cheeks! Perhaps she was counting upon the effect of that tear-stained countenance. But, if so, when she alighted at the door-steps, her disappointment must have been the greater, for now no escort was there.

Pausing in incredulous dismay upon the pavement, she looked up the street. Then, at the top of it, clear against the Park trees that rose greenly in the early morning light, she beheld the silhouette of two horsemen. And as she looked, one of them raised his hat, swung it out with a fine French salute, and was gone. Cruel, cruel! It was the third time she had been thus treated.



CHAPTER
XIII

CHAPTER XIII

DENIS O'HARA, Viscount Kilcrouney, was cursed (or blessed) with a soft heart; and it irked that soft heart of his to know that any creature under his roof should suffer. When that creature happened to be of the opposite sex—and so dainty a piece to boot as Lady Anne Day—the said soft-hearted Irishman began to bestow more attention upon the case than his own lady altogether liked.



“Those eyes of hers are fairly eating up her little face,” quoth he, all unconscious, to Kitty, as he surveyed the object of his compassion with regretful tenderness.

Nan's sensitive blush mounted on the instant. She glanced gratefully at Kil-

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croney, whose invariable courtesy and kindness had won in her an honest affection.

“I warned Lady Anne” — elaborate ceremony between these two, now bosom enemies, had become the rule — “that this Town life was nowise becoming to her. Pity she could not suit herself to the country, since the country suited her so much better.”

The glance of Lady Kilcrouney’s pansy-brown orbs sharpened the already fine point of her words. The three were assembled in Kitty’s white room awaiting the arrival of guests for a small friendly party. The first arrival being hereupon announced, Kitty rose with a great rustle of pink and silver brocade; and, passing her lord with a movement of her pretty head which might well have made him ponder, she hastened to her duties.

Lord Kilcrouney, who took the world easy both at home and in company, made, however, no attempt to follow her, but lounged across the sofa more closely to his fair guest. Nan likewise moved not. Perhaps she was not averse to paying Kitty back upon her one vulnerable point for a thousand artful

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stabs. She raised her eyes, therefore, in mute pathos.

“Why, now,” argued Kilcrouney, “what is the good of going on like this at all? Sure, it’s breaking your heart you are, as any one could see in half a wink.”

“Nobody cares,” said Nan, the corners of her mouth going down, “whether I have a heart to break or not.”

“Ah, God help us! Sure, me poor child, there’s another is saying the self-same thing of you this minute. I declare it’s the regular pair you are! And what beats me is that the pair of you will go and keep single on each other when it’s dying you are, both of you, to be one.”

“Oh, if you refer to my husband,” said Nan, beginning industriously to pleat a corner of her gown, “so long as he’s got his bullocks and his wheatfields and his turnips to keep him company, he cares little for the society of his wife.”

“Bullocks — nay, now, faith, I vow I’ll speak plain at last — though it’s loth I’d be to lose your pretty presence out of the house” — here Kilcrouney looked tender (how,

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indeed, could he regard a dear little woman otherwise than with tenderness?) — “’t is high time, my dear, that you should be after your Squire. Bullocks and turnips! Why, ’t is dice, and —”

He stopped abruptly. His eyes went round as those of a man who sees before him the enormity he has just escaped saying.

“And — and what?” cried Nan, rearing her figure into stiffness, her chin aloft, her eyes aflame.

“Why, why — nothing at all, the merest trifle. There’s a power of gossip. But you need n’t be jealous of the bullocks! And sure, that ought to be a comfort, at any rate.”

His glance twinkled, but his tone was caressing. He was bending to watch the effect of his words. It was not a disagreeable spectacle — this small face quivering with pride and pain, the white teeth biting a tell-tale lip, the tears ever rising to the lustrous blue eyes and ever resolutely driven back. Lady Kilcronev, at the other end of the room, had an unwontedly loud laugh this evening, a new strident ring in her voice.

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“Look you, now” went on Kilcrouney, “God knows it’s none of my business, but that husband of yours is a fine fellow. If you’ll take my advice, my dear, you’ll go back to him. There might come a time, you see, when you’d find he’d been waiting — well, just a troifle too long for you. Is it the humble-pie you can’t make up your mind to? God bless us, Nan!” The good-natured nobleman here took her hand (for the life of him he could not have helped pressing it — not a firm, dimpled, plump thing like his Kitty’s, but a mere wisp of delicate whiteness). “Why now, if you could but swallow your pride, you’d find that same humble-pie go down after it quite easy. Could n’t you write him a bit of a note, eh, Lady Anne?”

The tears brimmed over Nan’s eyelashes. She shook her head, for she could not speak.

“Ah, now, if he could see you this minute. Sure it would be the black heart that could keep from catching those tears on his lips!”

The room was full of buzzing talk: perhaps Lord Kilcrouney had raised his tones

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louder than he was aware of. An incisive voice suddenly parted the air over their heads. Nan started violently and drew her hand sharply from the grasp that would yet have retained it. She turned, to behold, with consternation, Kitty Kilcrouney herself, standing in close proximity, and Sir James Devlin by her side. Kitty was fanning herself. Her attention as well as her words seemed entirely devoted to her companion.

Nan, with a gradual subsidence of her first scarlet flurry, began to listen and understand. Kilcrouney got up lazily; and smiling, tried to catch his wife's glance; failing which, he sauntered away towards the card-table.

"Yes, indeed," Kitty was saying, "the heat is monstrous, Sir James; I marvel how you always look so cool."

"Why," said Sir James, and that light-blue eye, beneath which Nan never could feel comfortable, fixed itself slowly upon her, "'t is but a little secret of mine, a mere matter of expediency. 'T is the hot spells that make life agreeable; and to enjoy them a man must remain cool."

"Ah, I am not of your opinion," retorted

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Kitty drily. She never glanced in the direction of husband or guest. "In fact, this June scorching has quite prostrated me, and my Lord vows he will carry me away to his Ireland before the week is out."

"Surely a sudden decision," commented Devlin, upon a stifled yawn.

"Nay," returned his hostess sharply. "Town has been intolerable to me, to us both, these three horrible weeks!"

Three weeks was the measure of Lady Anne's residence at the Kilcronney mansion.

Nan rose and shook out her skirts with great deliberation. She marched with very stately air across the room, seeking her hostess, upon the spur of her outraged pride; she almost walked into the arms of Sir James Devlin.

"Can I offer your Ladyship my arm?"

She took it mechanically. She had no thought for the fascination of his snake-like glance, now, upon this tempest-wave of feeling.

"Are you likewise feeling the heat?" came the suave, unemotional voice in her ear. "You look singularly pale."

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“Nay,” said Nan, very loudly, with a harsh laugh, “’t is but this odious Town existence. I go to the country immediately.”

“Indeed,” said Sir James. His eyebrows were uplifted. He made her a bow, ostensibly of acquiescence. It was one, nevertheless, of incredulity.

“May I ask your Ladyship how long your Ladyship expects the Lady Anne Day to remain in your Ladyship’s house?”

Thus Miss Lydia, Kitty Kilcrouney’s tire-woman, who had been long enough in her present service to consider herself entitled to a confidential share in family councils. She spoke with a jerk of her head and a flash of an exceedingly lively eye.

But to-night her mistress was in no humour to condone liberties, and met her woman’s remark with an equal acerbity of temper and a scanning, contemptuous glance that was meant to put her back in her place.

“And, if I may venture to ask, what business is that of yours?”

“Only this, my Lady,” quoth Lydia, nipping her words, “that, unless your Lady-

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ship's guests soon depart, I shall have to crave my discharge from your Ladyship's establishment."

Even in anger, it was astonishing with what precision she who had for so many years addressed her mistress as simple "Ma'am" now sent the Ladyships tripping from her tongue.

"Oh, indeed," said Kilcrouney's Viscountess, sitting down to her mirror and negligently examining her left eyebrow; "why did you not speak it before? Pray, is there aught else in my arrangements that fails to meet your approval? You need, of course, but mention it — what do I say? — the merest hint!"

Tantrums Lydia could endure — even welcome as an opportunity; but to that high spirit sarcasm was unbearable. Her thin throat became convulsed. She knew it was not for a humble servant to speak. She hoped she knew her place. No one (she trusted) could accuse her of presuming. If every Lady's woman were as discreet as she, Lydia —

Lady Kilcrouney's gaze, in the glass, became fixed and steely. Lydia, meeting it over her

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mistress's shoulder, stopped abruptly with a gulp expressive of tears. Lydia's tears did not, however, rise easily, and a deal of preliminary pumping was required.

"Proceed," said Lady Kilcrouney with icy calm. "You were commenting, I believe, upon your discretion."

Lydia buried her dry cheek in her apron. Again from behind its folds she appealed to Heaven. If ever there was any one who had her mistress's interests at heart, was it not she? Only that she had been so much afraid to vex her Ladyship, she would have spoken before, as her conscience bade her. But knowing how fond her Ladyship was of the Lady Anne Day — Here a corner of muslin was shifted, and the alert eye, still unmoistened, was fixed with gimlet shrewdness on Kitty's reflection.

The sudden dilation of the nostrils, the twitch of the lip, the spark in the pansy-brown glance that the mirror betrayed, seemed to satisfy the Abigail, for she dropped the apron, smoothed it with her hands, ceased her unsuccessful gulping, and, allowing her throat to resume its normal appearance:

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“It’s high time your Ladyship should know, and it’s high time your Ladyship should act,” she remarked firmly.

Lady Kilcronney wheeled round. Never indeed, had mistress and woman been better agreed on any point. And it was charming to see how little this accidental skirmish affected their fundamental harmony.

“I know a good deal too much already,” she asserted.

“There’s a saying,” pursued the other, “like Mistress like maid —”

“Nay,” interrupted Lady Kilcronney. “It is to be hoped there are exceptions, my good girl.”

“Why, my Lady,” responded the maid, with the most engaging guilelessness, “I hope, I trust so too.”

The pair surveyed each other for a while dubiously, but mutely agreed to dismiss the consideration — other matters, for the nonce, being more pressing.

“Do you refer to my guest, or to my guest’s woman?” inquired the lady.

“Ho! my Lady, I refer to both. Of all the artful, odious, sly, designing French minxes I ever saw —”

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“ Mistress or maid, girl ? ”

“ Both, my Lady, both ! If that serpent had n’t the face to tell me to-night that her lady was twice as much admired as yourself ! ”

“ Bah ! ” said Kitty, turning petulantly back to her mirror.

She feigned a vast scorn, but this was atrocious hearing nevertheless.

“ Ho, my Lady ! ” — Lydia became once more of a sudden extremely agitated, and was constrained to control the fluttering in her virginal heart by the pressure of one bony little hand — “ I’ve seen it going on these weeks. What I’ve had to bear, your Ladyship can have no conception. And me knowing what the deceitful pair was up to ! People that is not content with their own husbands, but has eyes on — on other people’s belongings — ”

“ Really, my good girl, ” exclaimed Kitty, taking up her fan and agitating it with some energy, “ you’re positively wandering ! What piece of goods of yours has that black wench of Lady Anne’s been ogling ? For to be brief, this is the root of the matter, I take it. ”

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Here Lydia was shaken with a laugh of exceeding bitterness.

“Ho, your Ladyship, that wench (as your Ladyship rightly calls her), she may ogle, she may roll those black beads of eyes till they drop out of her head, but she'll never succeed in captivating Mr. Benson! Mr. Benson, as your Ladyship knows, is anxious to obtain *my* promise, if ever I could make up my mind to think of a butler. I've been quite amused, your Ladyship; but when it comes to lift her venomed tongue against your La'ship's own self—”

“Oh, then, of course your devoted soul was aflame!”

Kitty smiled as she spoke; but her smile expressed hardly more mirth than Lydia's laughter.

“‘How dare you!’ says I. ‘Ho!’ says I. ‘That's news! Admired? That whey-faced thing!’ ‘Whey-faced,’ she says, ‘you English stupid, you know not what is elegant, what is refined. My mistress,’ she had the impudence to say, ‘is a rosebud, — rosebud, you comprehend?’ That's the ignorant talk of her, my Lady. ‘Your mistress is

full-blown — full-blown — like that!’ And she waves her black hands, your Ladyship, this way.”

“Upon my word,” said Kitty sharply, “’t is a pretty state of things that you should thus be discussing your mistresses in the servants’ hall. I marvel Mrs. Pomfret keeps no better discipline among you.”

“Discipline, your Ladyship?” cried Lydia. “Why, if one was to scratch out her eyes, one could not keep discipline with that Toi-
nette. Oh, I spoke up to her, your Ladyship.

When you’ve done tormenting Mr. Benson,’ I said, ‘who does not want any of your attentions, I’ll be obleeged by your listening to me! I scorn your French insinuations about buds and full-blown roses,’ I said to her. ‘If I know anything of gentlemen, and I think I know something of their ways’” — the Abigail here looked complacently at her mistress — “‘there’s not one that comes to this house who would n’t prefer the rose to the wilted bud.’ ‘But, mayhap,’ she answers, the bold thing, leaning right up against Mr. Benson as she spoke, in her impudent French way, ‘there’s a gentleman *in* this

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house who thinks as I do! Has Mr. Benson' — she goes on rolling her eyes up at him — 'his master's confidence?'"

Lady Kilcrouney sat transfixed. The colour flamed into her face and then subsided. She looked at her own dainty reflection and shook her head. Then she feigned a yawn behind her hand.

"I trust you assured the Frenchwoman that in my house neither man nor maid meddles with their master's concerns."

"Well, my Lady, I'm sure I did my best — I smacked her face!" cried Lydia vengefully. "And it's just come to this between that French minx and myself — that your Ladyship's house can't hold us both."

"My Ladyship's house," said Lady Kilcrouney, with a slow smile, "has no intention of holding you both. It is his Lordship's wish to proceed to Ireland without delay."

"Indeed, my Lady," ejaculated Lydia; but it would seem as if this assurance, instead of being consolatory to the damsel, was fraught with some consternation. Astute as she was, she could not keep her jaw from dropping.

"By way of Bath, Lydia," pursued her

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mistress, watching her in the glass. "By way of Bath."

Lydia's countenance cleared as by magic. She regarded her mistress with an expression of admiring wonder not often evoked in her.

"You may begin to pack to-morrow morning," said Kitty carelessly.

If my Lord Kilcrouney was gaily unconscious of offence when next he sought his wife's company, nobody could seem less conscious of injury than my Lady Kilcrouney herself. Rarely, indeed, had she smiled on him with a greater sweetness. If she and Lydia did not know the ways of gentlemen, who should? It did not take her long to convince him that the desire to see Old Ireland once more was entirely his own. And as for the halt in Bath, why, Kitty had had a twinge — positively a twinge! If she were constrained to pause for a second and consider the most poetic part of her anatomy in which to locate this twinge, it was with the most convincing air in all the world that she finally extended the small taper finger of her left hand for his sympathetic inspection.

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He had not a thought to spare for French Nan's blue eyes as he kissed that delicate suffering digit.

At his bachelor lodgings in Sheppard's Market, Philip Day received (forwarded in due course from Queen's Compton) the letter which Lady Anne had penned on the very night of Lady Kilcroney's party.

The uncontrollable anger evoked by the situation was not without its effect upon the tone of the epistle. And yet it rang piteously enough:

This house is no place for me any longer. I have been treated with gross insult by Lady Kilcroney. Where shall I goe? I will do what you wish me. You are the master, and have but to command. You are aware that my mother's house is closed to me, or I would not trouble you (in the midst of your many interests and amusements) with a recollection of my troublesome existence. I understand you are in Town. But, not being favoured with your address, I am obleeged to send this to Queen's Compton. May I beg for a prompt answer? — Your *obedient* wife,

ANNE DAY.

The blood leaped hotly to Philip Day's face as he read. The piteousness of the wil-

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ful creature's letter, the jealous cry of her wifely pride, escaped him. The defiance which dubbed him "master," and promised "obedience" almost as a threat, struck him almost as if she had flung her little glove at him. Not thus, no, not thus would he have her back. Better separation for ever than the old tugging against the bondage of his love as if at a chain.

Nan had believed, indeed, that he now had no alternative but to receive her on her own terms. But his answer soon undeceived her:—

MY DEAR ANNE,—I thought I had made clear to you that the last of my wishes is to act as master—or jailer—towards yourself. Be comforted—the prison of Queen's Compton [these words were underlined] does not await you in the middle of your Town pleasures by which you set such store. I regret that untoward circumstances should oblige you to quit Lady Kilcrone's house; but I trust you will be satisfied with the arrangements which I have now concluded for your comfort.

I have hired, for the remainder of the season, a small yet elegant residence in Spring Gardens, overlooking St. James's Park; and I have obtained your father's permission that Lady Teresa,

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your eldest step-sister, shall hold you company so long as it please you to remain in London. She, I understand, views the prospect favourably, and has reached an age of sufficient discretion to make me and Lord Ongar regard her as an eminently suitable companion in the circumstances. Your equipage may remain in the same stables as before, and you can enter your new abode as soon as you please. — Your affectionate husband,

PHILIP DAY.

“’T is well — ’t is vastly well ; but if Teresa thinks,” cried Nan, in the solitude of her chamber, at the end of the violent storm into which this extraordinary document had thrown her — “if Teresa thinks I’m going to whirl her into a vortex of Town amusements she’s mightily mistaken ! By all I hold sacred, I’ll make it as dull for her as ever she found it at home !”



CHAPTER
XIV

CHAPTER XIV

AND she kept her word. She, who in Hertford Street had been feverishly anxious for the smallest social flutter, lived in Spring Gardens the life of a nun.



Her door was denied to all visitors except her immediate family. She refused every invitation; she shunned the fashionable hour in Mall or Park.

Poor Lady Teresa, who had accepted the responsibility of guardian to her volatile step-sister with very different anticipations, grew sourer day by day; justly incensed that the frivolity she had in-

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tended to rebuke (and to share) should have so unaccountably vanished.

Yet the Squire's wife scarcely seemed to profit of this period of quietude. A fever burned in her pretty cheek and in her over bright eye. To toss the night through in futile wakeful passion or to speed it amid the chatter of crowded rooms, the excitement of the gaming-table, the swaying languors of the minuet — 't is a question, indeed whether the solitary alternative be not the more wasting.

The echoes of that little Great World in which she had plunged herself came now but faintly to her ears. And yet, though her pride would not permit her to avow it, those ears were ever on the strain for the sound of one name.

But Nan, the pretty exile to France, had had little opportunities of making friends in England. The single close friendship of her youth, her friendship with Kitty Kilcrouney, had not borne the strain of a petty rivalry. And petulant, preoccupied Anne Day was not like to have formed fresh ties. An isolation, strange in the midst of the busy hum,

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settled round the luxurious small house in Spring Gardens.

Once Sir James Devlin called. He might have been observed to smile as he ran down the steps after the porter's denial: he was one whom a check stimulated; he was of the race that never fear to wait.

Mollified, perhaps, by her daughter's unexpected display of prudence, Lady Ongar relaxed in severity so far as to visit her. She had fully intended, excellent well-meaning lady, to end the preliminary lecture — *les reproches d'obligation* — by maternal forgiveness. But Nan was in no mood to bear reprimand of any kind. The encounter ended, much as had the meeting with Lady Kilcrouney, in the elder dame's complete rout. Sighing profoundly, Lady Ongar was hoisted by her stalwart footman into her barouche, and drove away with the dismal conviction that, instead of drawing the disunited couple closer together, she had but erected a new barrier between them.

One July day — Nan's terrible London season now reckoned some two months — so hot that the narrow house, with every win-

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dow open, seemed to pant for breath in the heavy stagnant air, Lady Sukey entered upon pale Nan like a whirlwind. She wanted, it appeared, a chaperon for Strawberry Hill. Lady Ongar had the megrims. Nan must instantly into her best gown and order round the greys. But Nan looked up from the languid needful of silk she was passing through her embroidery: "I cannot take you, child. *Et, du reste*, I have refused."

"What matter! That's just like your French nonsense. If you think yourself of such consequence, or that any one will notice!—Bustle, there's my good Nan!"

Lady Teresa put down the sixth volume of "Clarissa," and bestowed an acid attention upon the scene. Did Sukey really think she'd get that sullen piece to oblige any one? She herself had had an unsuccessful skirmish over the refusal of the very invitation in question. But Lady Teresa, in spite of the insulting dulness of her step-sister's establishment, found herself there so prodigiously more comfortable than at home that it was not her game to quarrel outright.

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No such consideration, however, restrained the irrepressible Sukey. When the expression of her peremptory desire, when an outburst of sisterly caresses failed, her rage broke forth.

“I suppose you think you’ll bring back your Philip by going on like this! I can inform you, my dear, that he’s long past caring about what you may do.”

“Indeed,” said Nan, smiling scornfully against the sudden stiff pallor that overspread her countenance.

“You’d have done better to keep him in the country, my love.”

“If ever you get a husband of your own, my poor Sukey, doubtless you will know how to manage him.”

“I shall at least know what to avoid,” cried Sukey; “and I hope and trust I’d show more spirit, and not let the whole world know I was breaking my heart for a creature who cared not a cress about me.”

“Sukey,” said Lady Teresa casually, taking up her book again, “you let your tongue run away with you.”

“Tessy — you’re a fool! ’Tis time she

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should know. Why, 'tis the talk of the Town."

"Oh, never think I mind her, Teresa," quoth Nan, beginning to tremble; "I have perfect confidence in my husband."

There was a pause, in which the Ladies Susan and Teresa exchanged a glance—a glance which, as she intercepted it, cut the Lady Anne to the very heart. Then Sukey, with all the cruelty of her years, turned with gusto to tell her brilliant French sister the full extent of her misfortune.

It had taken the contemned country Squire, it seemed, but a few weeks to become the buck most *à la mode* upon the Town. Lady S—— had sworn that he was the only man handsome enough to match her in the minuet. (It was rumoured that her Ladyship's appreciation did not end there; but then this might not be true, as it was asserted—on the best authority—that the beauteous Lady C—— C—— had the *pas* of her with a *liaison en règle*.)

"They were noted, my love, only last week, in spite of all precautions, in a private box," asserted Sukey. "Certain it was, anyhow,

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that, in more notorious circles, Master Haycock, as the name goes, my love, is the hero of the hour. At the supper-parties of Mrs. Brereton — the actress, my love — they say 't is positive scandalous. At Buck's and Archer's also 't is all Day and Devlin — for these two are bosom friends, child. Yes, your husband will have no boon companion but Jim the Devil, now — Sir Jim, who used to be dubbed," cried Sukey, tittering, "the deepest rake in St. James's — till Squire Day came to Town! And they say Queen's Compton will have to be mortgaged for the first time, for no fortune could stand the racket. Oh, la, my poor sister, 't was, in truth, a vast pity you were not content to keep him in the country. And now you seek to please him by shutting yourself up. Why, you little fool, you 're already forgot!"

Sukey paused, flushed and out of breath; but her triumph somewhat fell at sight of the other's countenance: it is not always a happy moment, that of successful revenge. Nan looked as if she had been through an illness. Her small nostrils were pinched; her eyes were scared and wild. Sukey stared

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at her sister, mumbled something inarticulate, and, catching up her mantle and hat, fairly took to her heels.

Teresa flipped over a page of Miss Harlowe's tearful experiences without even turning her head; while French Nan sat on, motionless, her eyes still fixed with that odd light in them, the needle poised in her arrested hand. Before her mind rose visions that stirred it well-nigh to madness. The Lady S——, smiling and whispering through the passes of the minuet. The beautiful Lady C—— C—— and her Philip, behind the curtains of that private box. Mrs. B——n fixing him with baleful eyes over sparkling glasses of pink champagne!

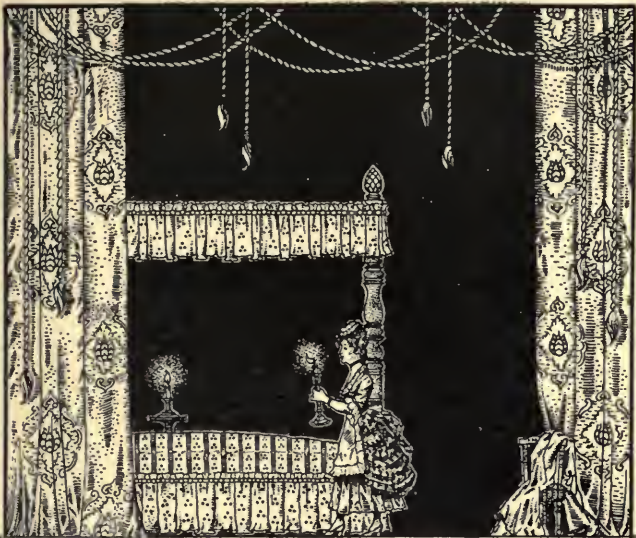
Lady Teresa ate a solitary meal presently, with no less appetite, however, than if she were not aware that Nan was sobbing her passionate heart out in futile misery, upstairs. (Her philosophy was to ignore the unpleasant to the utmost possibility — who shall say it was not a wise one?)

When something passed through the house like a little incarnate tempest, and the back

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door leading to the Park banged with a force that shook the house, Lady Teresa was careful not to raise her head from her plate of strawberries and cream. For, if she had looked up, she knew she would have seen, through the bow window, a wild, desperate Nan rushing through the garden into the dusk and space of the Mall. And it would have been her duty to hie her after her sister and to remonstrate.

It was as well, perhaps, that the step-sister took her chaperonage so easily this night, for Nan, upon no mad errand this time, but driven by mere physical torture out into the open, found in the Mall, in the falling darkness, in the solitude, some balm to the first intolerable smart of her pain. It was as if the vast, dim dusk laid its tranquil hand upon her brow.



CHAPTER
XV

CHAPTER XV



THE July night was falling in the gloom of a coming storm, its warmth seeming the heavier for the unusual darkness.

Sir James Devlin, by his own admission cold-blooded, found no exception to the state of the atmosphere. At such an hour as this, hour of intensity and brooding, he felt agreeably ripe for mischief; it might be that that devil in him, detected by Lady Kilcrouney, found himself more at home.

Humming (Jim Devlin had a sweet tuneful gift), he came through the Mall, from Brooks', where he had just swept a satisfactory sum from the pockets of his inseparable companion, Philip Day, making for White-

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hall, where a rendezvous awaited him — Nothing of a very exciting kind: a discreet little meeting, at thought of which he smiled, if with nonchalance, yet agreeably.

Suddenly the swinging measure of his pace was broken. His light eyes could see better than most people's in the dark, and they had caught a glimpse of a woman's figure motionless beneath a tree. Something in the outline, in the attitude, had struck him as familiar.

His steps hesitated, then fell back upon themselves. He came close to the solitary figure. Through the dusk he perceived that it was a small, slight creature, that the face was quite hidden in the shadow of a wide-winged plumed hat. She stood motionless; but, as he bent towards her, uncovering, he heard in the sultry silence her panting breath, rhythmized by the beat of her frightened heart. He spoke very gently: his voice, when he chose, could be as soft as a woman's.

“Alone? And with this storm brewing? Madam, can I be of no assistance to you?”

“Pray, Sir,” answered him a little tender

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pipe, thrilling to terror, "pass your way — there is none can assist me."

"Nay; but you are in trouble."

"Surely" — she seemed reassured by his respectful manner, and her voice now took a bolder note — "surely, to see a woman in trouble, Sir, need excite no wonder on the part of your sex, since it is your pastime to break our hearts!"

James Devlin drew back a step with the most consummate air of wounded benevolence.

"Before Heaven, Madam—!" he cried passionately. Then interrupted himself to continue in his former tone of deference: "It is indeed evident that my intrusion must seem impertinence; yet¹ to leave you here alone, in distress of mind, exposed to dangers you wot not of — so young —"

"And pray, Sir, how know you of my youth?"

"Madam, I feel it. I want no further illumination to tell me that you are young, beautiful, a lady — and that you have never stood alone before." A laugh, faintly flattered, escaped from the lips hidden in the

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shadow of the great hat. "If another than myself had seen you," pursued Devlin, "if I were to pass my way, as you bid me —" he paused.

"Well, Sir, and then?" queried she. Tremulousness and fear had left her. The trouble that weighed upon her was of the kind that drives a woman to seek desperate distraction. Could his cat-like gaze have penetrated beneath the shadow of the tilted hat-brim it would have found eyes lit with strange fires and cheeks painted scarlet in the darkness.

"I cannot leave you thus," he exclaimed, insisting, with a sudden impressive sternness; "it would be exposing you to insult. The Mall at night is no safe place for a woman alone." Even as he spoke a shadow passed by them—that of a man, suspiciously watchful, almost furtive—and was presently lost among the trees and the undergrowth of the Park. "See!" said Devlin, pointing.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed tauntingly. "And with you, Sir, I should be so safe!"

There fell a little pause between the two

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comedians, during which each tried to measure the other's thought.

Sir James had the advantage upon his fair companion; for, while recognising her, he also knew himself recognised. But Lady Anne believed herself safe in her incognito. Here was an opportunity not only for confirmation of her aroused jealousy, but also, if necessary, for retaliation. Her pulses were throbbing. The gathering forces of nature, lowering to storm about her, were nothing to the tempests gathered in her woman's heart. The man smiled to himself.

"My pretty Nan," thought he, "you have betrayed yourself a dozen times already. But, *allons!* it pleases you to keep up the feint; so be it. It suits my hand prodigious well; and I'll have your cards on the table in a minute, little beauty! Ah! you think you can play me safely to your heart's content, now, with the lights of your house twinkling twenty yards off. Well, the bolder the better for my game! — Madam," he said aloud, again retreating, again bowing low, "it is clear you misunderstand me.

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Safe with me!" he repeated, a sudden ring of pathos in his voice. "Could you but know—could I but show you the image in my heart—you would understand how, for the sake of one, all womanhood is sacred to me!"

He made a flourish with his hat, and took a step as if to depart, well counting on the quick gesture of recall, which, indeed, did not fail him. James Devlin was of those who know every possible combination of sound in the instrument, Woman—who have studied the instrument, indeed, till their nimbleness of finger is perfect. Yet it is not always to such that she yields her sweetest music.

"Nay," cried foolish Nan, with that flutter of the white hand that bade him stay. And as she spoke, the first low mutter of the thunder began to roll along the eastern horizon. "Nay, rumour has other tales of Sir James Devlin. If his thoughts are on one woman, 't is a secret he has vastly well kept."

A singular attentiveness came over the listener. One of less experience than himself might have been flattered by the bitter-

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ness of her tone, the pointedness of the accusation, the sudden discarding of pretence. But not so he.

“Rumour?” said he lightly, whilst his mind pondered. “Rumour is a lying jade. A man’s heart may be heaviest when he seems to treat life as a jest.”

“Oh, ay, doubtless ’t is the way with you gentlemen; and you but seek consolation to prove that you are wounded. Would that we women were as wise! I trust,” Nan went on with a little titter, “that those suppers with the fair Brereton lie with emollience on the smart.”

Devlin laughed. She had a biting tongue that stirred him. The piquancy of her foreign accent, of her occasional foreign turn of phrase, added a zest to her sallies. Still he groped. A faint flash reft the black sky; so came an uncertain glimmer across his mind. Could it be possible that he had, after all, prevailed where he had been conscious but of ill-success?

“Oh, fie, who can have had interest thus to malign me, fair Unknown?” said he.

“And what would my Lady C—— C——

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say — or, indeed, if it comes to that, her Ladyship of S——?”

“Ah, now I begin to see daylight. Most dear Madam, idle gossip has mistaken me for my friend, for my bosom friend, my shadow, my *alter ego* — him whom they call Squire Haycock, the country buck; the last, positively the last favourite with all the fair. Alack, I would glorify myself with his conquests an I could, for they are complete, Madam — complete and — numerous!”

The lady was seized with a fit of laughter of an exceeding bitter quality.

“Is this gentleman, then, so irresistible? Truly, I must guard against meeting him! And have you no fear, Sir, lest your Town innocence may be corrupted by his country profligacy, that you thus grant him such close friendship? But see how evil-tongued the world is! It is said that ’tis you have led this bucolic youth into his wicked ways.”

“I?” cried Devlin, clapping his hands together in the dark. “’Tis thus the world would judge of the purest philanthropy! If I helped the lad to fill a lonely life, you

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in your womanly compassion would be surely the first to commend me.”

“And you and he,” she interposed in a strangled, passionate whisper, “have contrived consolation vastly well!”

Devlin laughed to himself noiselessly. So the little Madam was jealous—jealous of her husband! The discovery had come with none of the mortification it might have brought to a less hardened philosopher. Jealousy was no bad bridge across the seemingly impassable chasm of a woman’s virtue. It was Philip Day! He had, in truth, struck a mighty friendship with Philip Day for reasons of his own: now was their wisdom proved.

“And you gentlemen,” pursued the soft voice beside him, “are such generous comrades! Quite willing to share your—*comment dire*—your consolations with each other, I understand.”

“I, Madam? Nay, I seek not so high as Squire Day these times, though truly I would venture so much higher. He—”

“He—?”

“Pshaw! Why should we talk of him?”

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“Why, indeed — why should we talk at all? Good-night. He —?”

“My fair Unknown, if Mother Eve’s curiosity so torments you, go you but to Vauxhall to-morrow night, and you may see the country conqueror in a supper-box with his last and highest love. Her Grace has wagered —”

“Her Grace has wagered?” echoed the wife mechanically, in dull tones of misery. She clenched her hands till the nails ran into her palms. “Go on!” she cried. Then, breaking out fiercely in her impatience as the meaning of his words burnt ever more clearly in her brain: “Her Grace? — who is her Grace? What has she dared wager?”

“Why” — he smiled, and had she been less feverishly excited she might have noted as ominous that he should allow her astonishing passion to pass unnoticed — “why, her Grace of D——. She has wagered merely that she will flaunt what all the world knows already — her conquest of my very poor friend in the unequivocal circumstances of a private box at Vauxhall to-morrow night.”

Upon his words, as if voicing Nan’s despair,

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the night suddenly broke into squall. Wind, rain, lightning, thunder were upon them. The trees in the Mall flashed at intervals for a second's space before Devlin's vision, white and frantic, wrestling with the blast. The face of the slight figure by his side was a moment betrayed to him in a stricken, pallid loveliness which set his blood exulting. She looked desperate, and never more desirable. The man's spirit, fierce beneath his armour of artificiality, rose elate with the tumult of the elements. Had he not known all the evening that his hour was coming?

A second had Nan been betrayed; but only for a second. Quickly she flung her scarf over her flapping hat, and drew the wide brim tightly round her cheek. The storm in her own heart made her insensible to that which raged around her. Of the unwilling fascination this man had previously exercised upon her, to-night she felt nothing; the tide of her jealousy was too strong to allow of any other emotion. He was but a pawn to her in the bitter game of retaliation upon which she was resolved.

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The unerring instinct of woman's coquetry taught this innocent daughter of Eve that now was the moment for her to fly that he might pursue with increasing ardour. That, recognised or unrecognised, she must still play the game of her incognito.

"Farewell, Sir," she cried, and started running.

In a second he was beside her, shaken from that coolness which gave him such insupportable and unflattering superiority.

"We cannot part thus!"

She halted and faced him with well-simulated indignation.

"Sir, I have help within call. At your peril pursue me one step further!"

The blast dashed between them. She saw his face quivering in a brief lurid light.

"You cannot be so cruel; we must meet again —"

Upon this the thunder rolled. He caught at her through the gloom. A piece of her scarf, taut in his hand, revealed that he had indeed, just in time, arrested her flight.

"What of her for whose sake all womanhood is sacred to you?" mocked the pretty

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voice, sweeter than ever, after the mighty note of the storm.

“Nay,” he urged, sliding his hand along the wet silk of her scarf to the slight arm that resisted his touch, “some miracle has taken place, for I vow, of all the world, you are she.”

“Let me go, Sir, or I shall call.”

“One word, one hope!”

There came a curious pause.

“*Mon Dieu!* one never knows.” Her mitted hand was in his grasp, but it lay so inert that even his ardour could find therein no encouragement to match with the mysterious change in her tone. “Just now it is no—no—no! But you gentlemen say of us we change our mind—sometimes.”

“And if you change—when you change yours?” he whispered. He raised the cold hand to his lips.

“*Mon Dieu,* Sir—were such a thing to happen—Sir James Devlin is no difficult person to find.”

“My God!” he said—and when Jim Devlin (in this most unlike his brothers of pleasure) used an oath it was when, rarest of

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occurrence, he was truly moved — “a word from you and I will come from the end of the world!”

“Why, then, good-night — one never knows.”

They were close by the postern of her back garden. And he knew, perhaps, that the best of his play was not to force his opportunity. But never had he had to set stronger control upon himself, than at this moment, when he allowed the little unresponsive hand to glide from his touch, the slender, storm-shaken figure to escape him in the darkness.

He stood while the storm beat round him, and heard, between the howl of the blast and the patter of the rain, the click of the lock which separated them. The storm had cheated him of his promise. The devil loose within him must be chained again.

“I can wait,” he said to himself; “I can wait.”

He started off at a furious pace through the rain back to the club — no rendezvous should know him to-night, since one that might have meant so much had eluded him almost as he held it. To still one passion

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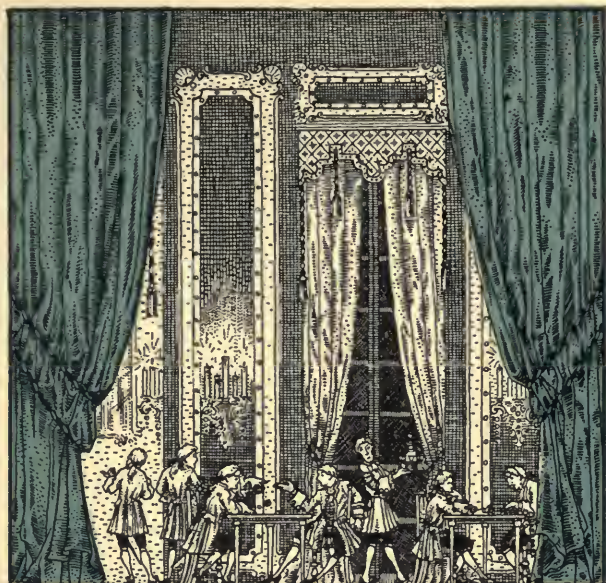
he must throw himself upon another—the cards, the cards!—Philip, the husband, the fool, to despoil still further! He would yet make a night of it, though Fate had denied him her tantalising promise. As he splashed along, he never noticed how, in the dark, from tree to tree, another followed.

Upstairs, in her lonely bed-room, Nan flung off her sodden wraps. Her cheeks were flaming, her heart was on fire.

The summer storm circled from east to west, muttered and faded through the watches of the night, grew again and clamoured, and at last died away, leaving a washed and glistening world rejuvenated, refreshed, breathing sweetness and peace. But the tumult in the wife's heart passed in no such wholesome fashion. Until that moment (now it seemed for ever unattainable) when she could weep her bitterness away upon the breast of the husband she loved (she herself scarcely knew how much) there never could be peace in her soul. Less than ever, poor Nan, if she sent that letter, which in the placid dawn she rose to write!

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All the while the pen ran, in elaborate feigned writing, the hand throbbed with the imprint of a kiss against which her whole being revolted. Jim Devlin knew his world : many a good woman fails through jealousy that would have been strong against love itself.



CHAPTER
XVI

CHAPTER XVI

HAVE you seen Day and the Devil?" said one member of Brooks' to another, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the card-room. "Hot going, I can assure you."



"What, already?" cried my Lord Verney, glancing at the clock. It was scarce two after noon.

"Already?" echoed Mr. Stafford. "Nay, man, they sat down at eleven, and there are fortunes passing across that table that would make a modest individual like myself prodigious comfortable for a year."

"Our country lad being bled, as usual?"

This handsome, downright, sturdy Squire, who promised so suddenly to cut them all

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out with the fair sex this season, was no favourite among the fashionable youth on the Town. Even that serious beau, Lord Verney, had his sneer for him.

“Wrong, my Lord, wrong this time!” cried his companion jovially. “The Squire is getting back his own; and Devlin’s more like his own sulphureous godpapa than ever. He’ll sit till he’s beggared; the luck’s dead against him. He’d stake his soul, I believe, if Day were fool enough to throw on such security.”

Lord Verney shrugged his shoulders, but merely to give countenance to his curiosity; for, as he shrugged, he drew near to the card-table in the window recess, where he had caught sight of Devlin’s sharp outline.

Here matters seemed, indeed, as Mr. Stafford had described. Philip Day, with a composed yet watchful countenance, sat, a pile of papers and coin on either side of him, facing Sir James, who, white-cheeked and fiery-eyed, was shuffling with fevered eagerness.

Devlin was known as a successful gambler; his cool head and remorseless determination

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invariably told in the long run against the impetuosity of his usually more or less youthful opponents. He had been winning hand over hand during this last month from his new sworn friend, so that many had wondered or scoffed at the simplicity of the "country cousin's" devotion to a man who was ruining him. But to-day all was changed, and the rare spectacle of Devlin losing steadily was presented to Brooks'. It was soon evident that he was a bad loser. Not, indeed, that either anger or distress was written on his set features, that his deliberate voice was raised, that he entered upon protest or lamentation; but, for those who knew the signs, there was something in his very intensity of stillness that betrayed him: the glitter of his eye, the tension of his fingers round card and dice-box.

"He's desperate," whispered Mr. Stafford to Lord Verney as they stood looking on; "and he'll not stop till he's cleaned out. Jim," cried he aloud good-naturedly, pointing to the neglected plate and glass at his friend's left hand, "take your smack, man! Your pardon, Squire, but the poor devil

must have a bite to keep him up — if he is to go on.”

There was a slight emphasis on the “if,” by which Mr. Stafford, a gambler himself in moderation, sought to hint to his friend that it was high time to retire.

Jim Devlin looked up from his cards a second, just baring his teeth, as might a dog too sullen even to growl.

“Your throw,” said he in his low voice to Philip.

“If you wish to break off, Sir James,” said Philip — the great urbanity with which he spoke contradicted by the look he fixed upon Devlin — “I am quite content.”

“Break off!” Devlin had a laugh in his throat that was not written on his face. “Nay, man, that would leave the balance somewhat unequal, would it not?”

“Then I am equally content we should go on,” said the Squire, taking up the dice-box in his steady brown hand. “What shall be the stake? A hundred — ”

“A hundred? Five hundred!”

Verney and Stafford looked at each other. Nothing, somehow or other, was more certain

to them than that Devlin would lose again. And truly in another minute, with philosophic eye, they watched him scribble his note. Philip Day placed the paper neatly on his pile, gathered the cards into his grasp, and shuffled once more. Devlin, his forehead on the back of his hand, added some calculations to a long list of figures on his tablets. His brows were drawn, his lips moved noiselessly.

A servant came across the room, on foot of practised noiselessness. He halted beside Sir James, holding a tray with two or three letters on a level with his elbow.

“Blast you! What do you want?” cried Devlin savagely.

“Your man, Sir James, brought them letters — one of them, says he, is urgent.”

With a swift movement of his hand Devlin tipped the letters from the tray on to the table, and plunged back into his calculation, without even deigning a glance upon them. They lay across the cards. One was on its face, with sprawling seal upturned; one was addressed in clerkly hand; the third (marked “Urgent,” with two dashes) unmistakably

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bore a woman's writing, as unmistakably a feigned one, yet with a couple of betraying foreign flourishes. Upon this last letter Philip Day's gaze became riveted, as he sat waiting. The onlookers' interest was all centred upon his opponent, however: and, indeed, Devlin's was the countenance of a man who stares at his own ruin.

"Shall we go on?" said the Squire at last. He spoke a little hoarsely. Devlin put down the paper in his hand and looked across at him. His white lips were parted in a spasmodic grin.

"It's full-stop with me this time," he said in a sort of whisper.

Philip seemed to ponder a second. Then, without betraying the smallest emotion, he made answer —

"Nay, that would be a pity. Surely there is yet something you can stake."

"I reckoned my last nag in the last I O U," said Devlin, and was shaken once again with a ghastly mirth.

"Why," said Day, leaning across the table, so that his big card-cuffs almost covered the letters, "for the sport's sake let us throw

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again, I say. I should be loth to rise from the table so easy a winner, and my blood is up."

He looked cold and pale under his bronze, and his tone was singularly passionless as he spoke. Mr. Stafford nudged my Lord Verney.

"The rôles are changed," he whispered; "the devil's gone into our good country lad, and he's for Jim's soul after all!"

"Any asset is good enough for a sporting stake," went on Philip, while Devlin stared at him with hot, weary eyes. "The sport's the thing! Why—why, I'll play you for this letter. Five hundred was the last stake! Five hundred, then, against this letter!" He lifted his cuff and, so doing, dexterously turned over the letter marked "Urgent," then laid his forefinger upon it. It was sealed with a plain green wafer.

Devlin glanced at the letter, then back again at Philip.

"Are you serious?" he cried, his light eyes flashing. "You're a rare fellow, Philip"—there was almost a note of contempt in the relief of his voice. "Done with you!"

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The others held their breath for the next shuffle and throw.

The gambler's luck had turned. Jim Devlin won.

"We'll throw again," he cried. "Five hundred?" He held up the note he had just recovered.

"Nay," said Philip quietly, "the same stake."

"How now?"

"The letter! I've a fancy for it now. I see it brings luck."

Jim Devlin eyed its green seal a second reflectively: he had still much leeway to make good. He is no gambler who has not a fervent belief in luck. "The letter, then," cried he. So far, indeed, it had proved a mascot to him. The letter it should be. As to its contents? Reproach, tears! He knew its contents by heart already. Did not the minx in Whitehall, whom he had failed last night, favour such green wafers? Lucky at cards, unlucky in love — Well, she was unlucky enough in her lover, poor wretch, to illustrate the saw for him to-day.

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His whole fortune was at stake. Vaguely he thought of Lady Nan — capricious beauty — and now it was but to be glad of last night's unsuccess: the more chance for him to-day. *Unlucky in love!* Not that he would give her up in the end, but that all other passions pale before the self-centred personal lust of the gambler.

Again he won. Again the Squire imperturbably proposed a fresh throw.

“Still the same stake?”

And “Still the same stake,” came the answer.

“Squire Haycock's gone mad!” cried Verney at last in hardly subdued tones.

“Not so, gentlemen,” said Philip, looking up with a pleasant air, “but an apt pupil in your London school. Come, Sir James, you have the luck, but I have still some haycocks at my back. We stand even, now, I believe.” He pushed the heaps of I O U's and coin towards his partner. “We stand even,” he repeated. “Then let me propose. Five hundred again?”

Jim Devlin hesitated; his eye sought the green wafer uneasily. A vague suspicion

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flickered into his mind. He leaned across the table as if to turn over the letter.

“Why, Jim,” interrupted Mr. Stafford, “you’ll never let shire beat St. James in sporting valour.”

“A thousand against this missive?” proposed Philip coolly.

“Done, then!” cried Devlin hastily. He shuffled, threw — and lost.

“The luck has turned again,” said Lord Verney. “Be wise, Sir James.”

“This time, my Lord,” said Philip, rising deliberately, “your friendly advice is needless: Sir James and I play no more to-day.”

He took up his unusual gain from the table. Devlin raised uneasy eyes from the gold and paper he was sorting.

“You will let a man see the amount of his loss, at least?” he queried, with a would-be indifferent smile, and stretched out his hand.

“Nay,” said Philip, smiling back, “that was not in the bargain.” As he spoke he slipped the letter into his breast-pocket.

“Why, then, we meet again this evening?” urged Devlin.

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“I rather think I may be engaged,” returned the Squire, “so pray do not count upon me. Fare ye well, gentlemen.”

The strong figure swung down the room. As Devlin looked after it a sudden angry fire sprang into his puzzled eye. By gad! — those were the shoulders of the man who had jostled him on the steps of Elm Park House to hie after Lady Anne’s coach. He had thought to play a very fine game with Master Haycock. Was it possible, could it be possible, that he — he, Jim Devlin! had been played with? The mischief, that he had not had the sense to stop before the last throw!

He hurried across the Park to call at Lady Anne’s door: her Ladyship was at home to no one.

It was, it seemed to the experienced Sir James, beyond the bounds of credibility that the letter could have come from her, that she could have summoned him so soon. But yet, Day’s attitude had been passing strange for a man who had won back his whole fortune in an hour.

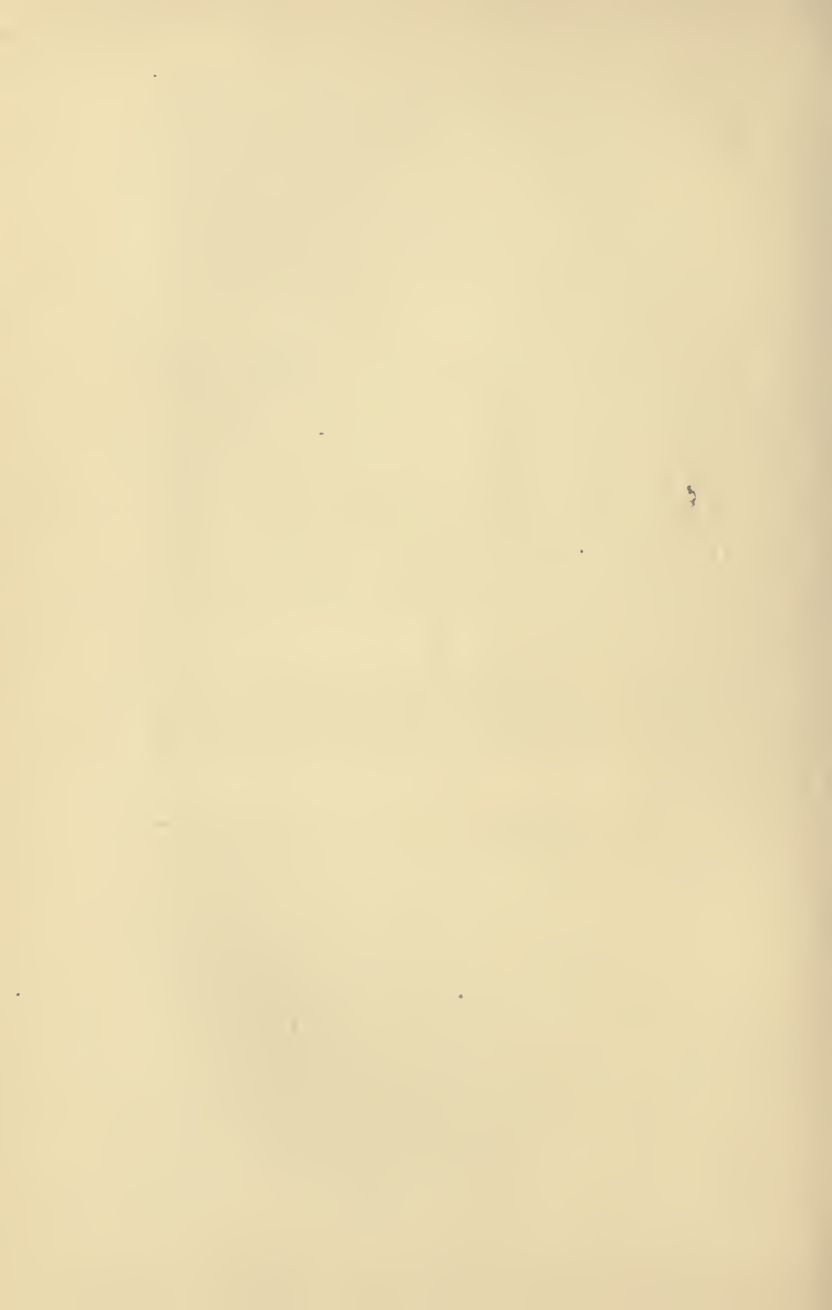
Jim the Devil wore a countenance of un-

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wanted gloom as he turned away from Lady Anne's door; which was not lessened when he next ascertained that "the minx" in Whitehall had *not* written. There is no counting on the jades!



CHAPTER
XVII



CHAPTER XVII



HE lights twinkled among the trees; the band played loud and gay. In the boxes all round the rotunda, and among the walking throng, the fun was fast and furious.

But in supper-box number 13, at Vauxhall, this July night, dimness reigned and silence. Yet it was not deserted. Behind the half-drawn curtains there was a small shrinking form, and a heart out-beating even the rhythm of the dance-music.

Now that she was here, all Nan's courage seemed to have melted from her; all her high schemes of vengeance to have broken away. Only that, of the two evils, she could better face the thought of fencing with the cavalier

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to whom, in her heat of anger, she had given rendezvous, than of fraying herself a passage alone, unprotected, back through that seething, vulgar, insolent crowd, she would have instantly sought to make the best of her way back.

Her bold plan of confronting Philip—the gay buck *que toutes ces belles dames s'arrachaient*—in his triumphant faithlessness with his enamoured Duchess, herself leaning upon the arm of another man, seemed now neither tempting nor possible. She only wanted to creep home, poor wounded bird! Oh—if the green walls of Queen's Compton's woods were but about her again, God knows she would never ask to fly beyond! Nay (so low had Nan been brought), she told herself she could have sat at Madam Day's knee, have confessed and been chidden, wept and been forgiven—all with considerable comfort.

The noisy mirth about her, the hideous laughter of the throng, the clamour of the music, accentuated her sense of misery. Let Philip have his Duchess, his suppers, his private meetings. As for herself, she

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was done with it. She would go home. Home to Queen's Compton. Though he loved her no longer, he could not refuse her that shelter which was her right.

Three taps at the door of her box — the signal she had herself devised — set those fluttering pulses of hers out of all bounds. Yet she almost welcomed the end of her suspense. She pulled the string of the latch, then ensconced herself more closely still in her retired seat, drawing the hood of her domino further across her face.

Yet the instant she laid eyes on the newcomer she knew that here was not the man whom she had expected. The tall, cloaked figure well-nigh filled the box-door. Nan's heart almost fainted away within her as she realised what no doubt had occurred: some passing adventurer had noticed the gloom and silence of her box, and promised himself a gallant opportunity. Why had she not fixed upon a less commonplace signal? Any one might tap three times.

Had she had the strength to call for help, it could but have exposed her to irretrievable

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scandal. Like some frightened thing of the woods, she cowered, as if by her very immobility she could escape attack.

The stranger's cloak was flung half across the lower part of his face, his hat drawn down across the upper. He stood a moment in the centre of the box; and, all the more intolerably, because she could not see them, she felt his eyes upon her.

Then a new terror laid hold of her because of the words he was speaking :

““ Vauxhall to-night, box 13. Tap three times. I shall be there at half after nine. The Unknown of the Mall.’ Am I late?”

Nan rose with a single movement from her chair.

“Who are you?” she panted, one hand upon the curtains of the window, ready to draw them aside, should she have to call for assistance, the other gathering the concealing domino more closely across her figure.

The man closed the door of the box carefully behind him; then he advanced across the dim little space, so close to her that he could hear all her silks rustle with her quick breathing.

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“Why,” said he, “when two that are unknown meet, ’t is doubtless for better acquaintance. But over so entrancing a process let us not hurry! With your permission, Madam, I will take this seat beside you. Will you not be seated too?”

Nan’s righteous indignation lost some of its impressiveness by having to pass through the folds of her hood. But, muffled as her voice was, there was no doubt that she was very angry:

“You have no right here, Sir! You are no gentleman to thrust yourself upon a lady’s company!”

“Nay, beautiful Unknown, as fairly and honestly as any gentleman could, I have gained the right to meet you in these gardens of delight this evening.”

“Sir!”

“Madam, ’t was but a throw of the dice, if you will. But a lady of your quality will need no explanation of the rules of honour among us bucks on the Town—”
The sneer, just perceptible in the previous speech, was here emphasised in unmistakable fashion.

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“Oh!” cried the unhappy bride, a bewildered yet overwhelming suspicion upon her, “my letter! *Ah ciel*, is this the honour of English gentlemen?”

“Fortune favoured me,” said the man, leaning so close to her that, though she drew back till her head struck the wall of the box, the sense of his proximity, in its strength and relentlessness, brooded upon her as a swooning terror.

“I shall call for help!” she gasped, pulling aimlessly at the curtains.

“Nay,” he answered, “I think, Madam, yours would seem a strange tale, unless, indeed, you will deny this letter, which I have carried so happily in my breast all day: ‘Box 13, Vauxhall to-night. Tap three —’”

She interrupted him with a hysterical cry:

“*Mon Dieu!* Hush!” and sank palpitating on her seat. Into what mire had she not stepped, dragging after her the good name of Day? Well, she would still fight her best to keep it from open scandal. And if she could not weary the insolent wretch

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by scorn and silence — why then, at the worst she could always call.

She clutched the silken folds of her cloak tightly across her breast with two desperate hands. She would say not a word — not one word. And *ce beau galant* would at last tire of so one-sided an amusement!

But *ce beau galant* sat him down on the chair beside her with an alarmingly deliberate air.

“And now, to make acquaintance. What a lucky throw of the dice was that for me! Come now, I’ll forfeit for ever my character as one who has some knowledge of your lovely sex if within half an hour you do not say that it has been a lucky throw of the dice for you too. Come, look at me, pretty Unknown of the Mall. Am I not as good a figure of a fellow as the one you hoped to meet? Come, be truthful, am I not even a finer fellow? ’Tis said that silence gives consent. This admission, once made, ’tis the first step to good acquaintance. For the next — just the tip of your little hand in mine — one of your rosy fingers to hold. Nay, Madam, do not shrink; I am the most

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respectful, if the most privileged, of your servants. One of those little fingers, 'tis surely not too much to ask."

A hand, very gentle yet very strong, was laid across hers as she clenched them under the domino. She faintly shrieked at the touch, but it was not withdrawn.

"Oh, Madam," pursued he, his lips close to her hood, "this is truly most excellent sport. How prodigious well you know the rules of the game!"

Suffocating, she could utter no further sound, but flung all her energies into a mute passion of resistance. Not even the tip of her finger should the monster plume himself upon obtaining from her. His presence seemed to encircle, to strangle her, although it was but with one hand lightly that he held her; a hand of iron in a velvet glove!

"And now," cried he, with a sudden laugh, "I vow the preliminaries have lasted long enough. You have sufficiently convinced me, my dear, that you're most daintily coy, and of sufficient virtue. Sweet Unknown of the Mall, pass over further preliminaries! The charming facts speak for themselves.

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Here, a fair lady, faithful to the rendezvous which she has made with a certain gallant gentleman; and here a gentleman to her rendezvous, without undue vanity, be it spoken, vastly superior to the one she expected to see — as, if you will but look on his countenance, Madam, you will instantly recognise for yourself.”

So saying, the visitor released Nan’s silk-hidden fingers, removed his hat, dropped the screen of his cloak, and parting the curtain of the box, allowed a gleam of light from without to play upon his countenance.

Nan would have been no daughter of Eve if she had not been peeping at him from between the folds of her hood.

She looked, and thought herself mad. Looked again, and thought she would die. Upon a third look she could have cried aloud in frantic gladness; upon a fourth, felt her blood invaded by the creeping ice of terror. Philip — it was Philip! And he had no idea of her identity; for sure, oh God, he had not! — else would he never have betrayed himself to her in that mocking gallant way; else, indeed, he must have

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killed her! Here, then, was some trick of Devlin — rightly dubbed Devil — to part them for ever, and have her at his mercy.

“ Well, now, your verdict? ” said the easy bantering voice that smote her ear with a fresh cruelty.

The handsome face before her bore a half mocking smile; but there was also an insolent light of ardour in the brown eyes that she had seen burn for her with such a holy and tender flame.

“ Does not the prospect please? ” he insisted.

She could not answer: if she had spoken she must have sobbed. He slid an arm around her waist — a touch which thrilled her with unwilling joy and yet with anguish. Then a sudden fire, fire of jealousy, of love, of fury, kindled in her veins. Now she knew how Philip amused himself while her heart was breaking. This is what he made of his marriage vow! *Ah, fi donc!* And she who had kept herself so pure, even in thought, amid all her dangers! Was unfaith, then, so easy a thing to man? It needed not even the excuse of the great

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lady's fascination, of the celebrated actress's practised allurements — no: a chance rendezvous, fruits of an ignoble gamble, and the first unknown woman good enough — oh, horror!

In her frenzy, she wellnigh revealed herself. But a second thought prevailed. From the very heat of her passion came a suggestion of irresistible fascination. She would reserve her vengeance of self-discovery till that moment when she could fling her identity in his face, with a proof of his own falseness from which there could be no evasion.

She slipped, as if carelessly, a white hand from the folds of her domino.

“Upon my word,” she cried, upon a new note of feverish coquetry, “you have a prodigious good opinion of yourself! But I will not say ——” She stopped to bite her trembling lip. Then the growing jealousy would assert its way. “I will not say but that her Grace of D—— shows herself for once a woman of taste!”

A sudden gleam, instantly repressed, leaped to Philip Day's glance. He caught the hand, upon its quaint French flourish,

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into his grasp. How cold they were, these hands of the two who were playing pitch-and-toss with their own happiness!

“Her Grace?” echoed he, his accents changing from their careless tone. “Pooh, sweetheart, what are all the Graces a man has known to the one grace that is yet a mystery to him?”

He had to be cruel for his purpose; yet it hurt him to feel the tender fingers twitch in his hold.

“And who knows, Sir, that you may not yet be sadly disappointed?” quoth poor Nan, with a sob in her throat.

“I?” cried he. “I? — nay, my dear, nay, sweet Unknown, nay, my fair prize of dice, inspiration and kind fortune! Why, the very sight of your letter, as it lay before one whom I vow was never made to appreciate you, struck I know not what glow into my being. Place your woman’s finger on my wrist and feel how these pulses beat: I swear, as they have never beat before. From the instant, sweetheart, that I set foot in your box, I knew that my hour had come — the hour that a man knows but once in a

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lifetime! Nay, I'll never believe the vision of you could fail of the promise, of the exquisite promise, that runs honey and flame in my blood. But if, gentle Mystery, you wish it so, I shall ask no dearer boon of fate than to sit with you, ever in the darkness, and hold you thus."

Both his arms were about her now — the old strong clasp for which she had hungered so many days! It brought with it to-night such new, overpowering sweetness to Nan that she was fain to yield to it for a while before the harrowing sense of all the bitterness it really meant could strike home to her. Then she lifted her head from the shoulder where it had lain so willingly, and with both hands strove to thrust him away. But all her strength had left her; as well might she strive to move a rock.

"Why, pretty one, were we not well as we were?" he said. His voice was shaken. He caught her back. He felt her palpitate in his arms, felt how her poor heart beat as he crushed her against his breast, how she would have failed and fallen had it not been for his upholding arms. And then, suddenly:

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“Why — Nan!” he whispered in her ear.
“Why, *Nan!*”

“Philip!”

He suffered her to push him from her this time. She cast the domino from her on the floor. Then, with a hand on either of his broad shoulders, little Nan stared into her husband's face with a desperate eagerness that as yet dared not be ecstasy.

Yet what she read there needed no word from him or her: what of love, what of patience: what of determination, tender reproach — nay, of a passionate joy no less than her own.

She broke into wild weeping and flung herself upon his heart.

“You knew me, you knew me all the time! Oh, Philip, forgive — forgive, and take me home!”

In spite of all the anxious sorrow she had caused him, he spoke but one word of rebuke.

“Nan,” he said, “if I had not won that letter —?”

“Oh!” she began, all in hot shame, yet

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eager in her innocence. But he laid his finger on her lip. That she should try and justify herself he could not endure.

“I know,” he said. “Oh, my poor little foolish French girl, did you think your English husband had ceased to protect you, even when you would have naught of his love! My dear, did you believe it was for love of gambling I went to Lady Buck’s; or that the pleasures of masquing—hollow pretext for folly playing at vice—allured me yonder night to Elm Park House? Or yet that ’t was sympathy with the gambler and profligate that made me strike with Devlin so close a connection that I was known as his shadow—a shadow, Nan,” said the Squire, with a marked emphasis in his voice, “that exceeded the duty of most shadows and followed its body even in the dark?”

She raised her eyes, so abashed yet so clear, to meet his earnest glance.

“Then last night—?” she faltered.

“Yes,” said he, “even last night I was at hand.”

Her tears leaped out again. She was humiliated, crushed; yet there was a savour in

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her very punishment sweeter than the scent of bruised herbs. And the next instant she was in his arms again, and his lips gave her words of love and kisses together.

“Oh, Nan, do not speak. I know, I know. And I have had to be cruel to you too — poor child, that would not be taught by a kiss. I played upon your very love for me. Ah, you strove to taunt me into jealousy, and I have captured you back, my bird, by your own net.”

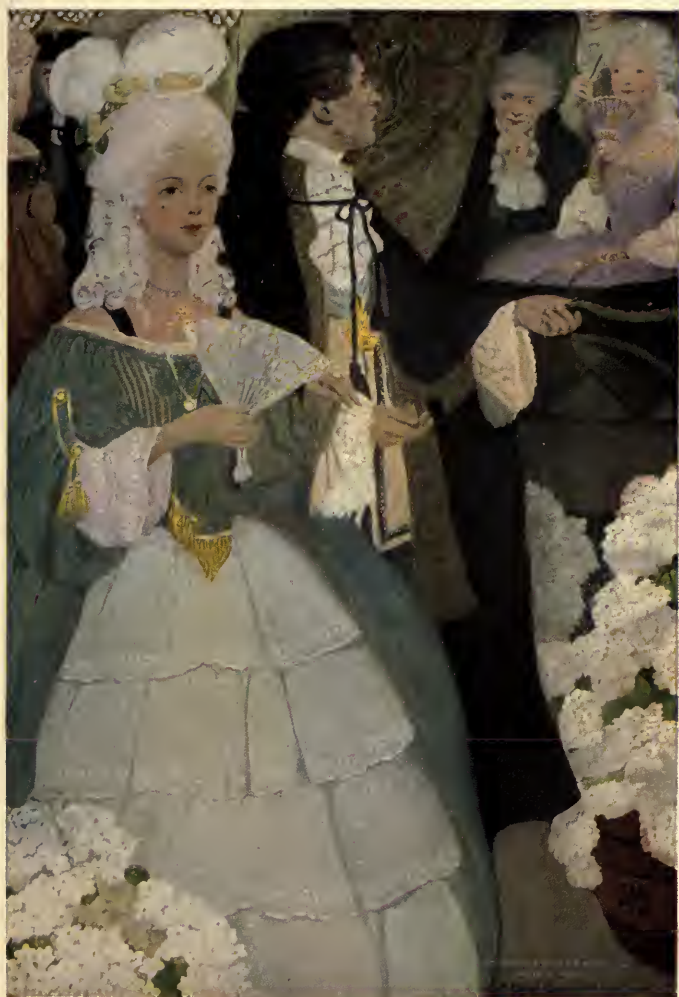
“Back to your feet,” she said, and her tears ran down into their kisses.

“No,” said he, “to my heart — that heart which has always held you since first it received you — little French Nan.”

“Nay,” she whispered back to him, happy laughter catching up her happy sobs, “not French Nan any more — English Nan, the Squire’s wife.”

“My own Nan!”

“Pray,” said her Grace of D—— suddenly over her shoulder to one of the gentlemen who sat behind her in her box — she had been in no very urbane temper all the even-



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ing, and it was the first remark she had vouchsafed for quite half an hour — “is not that Mr. Day yonder in the crowd, with a lady on his arm?”

“Even so,” said my Lord Verney, leaning over the edge of the box.

“La!” said her Grace, with a short laugh; “and who may the new flame be? Why, ’tis a mere chit — but a bold one to march her conquest about thus barefaced! Nay, very worthy Lord, you are too prodigious well brought up by your lady mother to have acquaintance with such quality! Pray, Sir James, come you forward. I’ll wager, if the creature’s known at all, you will know her.”

Jim Devlin came languidly from the back of the box and raised the single eyeglass.

“See how it is,” he murmured, while his pale eye roamed in the crowd, “the country freshness of the fellow will be his ruin. If I but let him one instant from my sight our pretty Squire falls in mischief. Now whom has he gleaned?”

Even as he spoke his countenance altered, the glass dropped from his eye. Then he

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burst into a laugh, so boisterous that none had ever heard the like from Jim the Devil before.

“Why, egad!” he cried, “haycocks are the price of virtue to-night — The fellow has picked up his wife!”

Philip Day, passing on his way out of the ring close beneath the Duchess’s box, with Lady Anne upon his arm, lifted his hat gravely and saluted the company.

THE END



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